DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 313 620 CG 022 143

AUTHOR	Kalter, Neil; And Others
TITLE	Children of Divorce: Facilitation of Development through School-Based Groups. Grades 4 and 5. A Replication Manual.
INSTITUTION	Michigan State Dept. of Mental Health, Lansing.
PUB DATE	88
NOTE	170p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - General (050)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adjustment (to Environment); Counseling Techniques; *Divorce; Grade 4; Grade 5; *Group Counseling; Intermediate Grades; Intervention; *Preadolescents

ABSTRACT

This manual outlines a time-limited group intervention for children in grades 4 and 5 who are experiencing parental divorce. Part A, "Overview and Program Organization" (Neil Kalter), includes an introduction to the manual, an overview of developmental facilitation groups, and a discussion on group organization. Part B presents guidelines and content for discussion leaders of children's sessions: (1) "Session 1: Introductions and Group Story-telling" (Jeffrey Pickar); (2) "Session 2: Pre-divorce Fighting between Parents" (Milton Schaefer); (3) "Session 3: Parents Tell the Children about Their Separation" (Katherine Okla); (4) "Alternative Session A: Custody Issues: The Court Scene" (Steven Rubin); (5) "Alternative Session B: Visiting Issues: Awaiting the Noncustodial Parent; A Weekend with the Noncustodial Parent; Returning to the Custodial Parent; A Group Letter to an Uninvolved Noncustodial Parent" (Jonathan Falk and Marci Gittleman); (6) "Alternative Session C: Remarriage and Stepparenting Issues: Mother Tells the Children of Her Plans to Remarry; Family Dinner with the Prospective Stepfather and His Children; The Role of the Stepparent" (Dana Alpern); (7) "Session 7: The Group Newspaper" (Shelly Schreier and Mindy Markow); and (8) "Session 8: The Final Group Meeting" (Shelly Schreier and Mindy Markow). Part C discusses management issues during children's sessions. Part D presents discussions on the pre- and post-group meetings with parents and leaders, both by Neil Kalter. Part E consists of "Evaluation Design and Results" (Neil Kalter) and a brief mention of minimal feedback evaluation. References are included and a letter to parents describing the groups, a parental consent form, and examples of group newspapers are appended. (NB)

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CHILDREN OF DIVORCE: FACILITATION OF DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SCHOOL-BASED GROUPS

Grades 4 and 5

A Replication Manual

by

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a prevention services project

of

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Lansing, Michigan

1988

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FOREWORD

Divorce and remarriage are so prevalent a phenomenon in the United States that more that forty percent of children will be confronted with the need to adjust to disruption and reconstitution of familial relationships (Glick, 1979). In some schools in Michigan a majority of children in a classroom are members of divorced and reconstituted families.

The intervention described in this manual is an approach to assisting these children to avoid the deleterious aftereffects of family conflicts and confusions. It grew out of clinical practice at The University of Michigan and has now been developed and refined over a five year period in nine school districts in middle and low income areas in Washtenaw and Wayne counties.

In 1984, Neil Kalter and the Washtenaw County Community Mental Health Center sought state prevention funding to develop and evaluate these school-based time-limited groups for children of divorce, starting with children in grades 4 and 5. This intervention for children of divorce thus became one of a number of prevention initiatives piloted by the Michigan Department of Mental Health's Prevention Services Unit under the direction of Betty Tableman. A special legislative appropriation has underwritten this development of prevention service models for community mental health agencies in Michigan.

This manual, an integral part of the piloting process, is the first step toward broader dissemination of this service model.

Thomas D. Watkins, Jr., Director
Michigan Department of Mental Health

February 1988

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The development of this preventive intervention has been an exciting endeavor. Many individuals and schools have contributed enormously to the successful completion of this model. I would like first to thank the staff, including principals, teachers, mental health professionals, and secretaries at the following schools: Field, Gallimore, Starkweather and Tanger Elementary Schools in the Plymouth-Canton School District; Lincoln Later Elementary School in the Lincoln Consolidated School District; and Whitmore Lake Elementary School in the Whitemore Lake School District. Special efforts by Ms. Joyce Darren (principal at Gallimore), Ms. Katherine Geddes (principal at Lincoln), Mr. Larry Miller (principal at Field), Mr. Carroll Nichol (principal at Tanger), Dr. Carolyn Pryor (school social worker at Whitmore Lake), and Ms. Sherry Senneunas (school social worker at Lincoln) made the piloting of the groups and the implementation and evaluation of the intervention both successful and pleasurable for our group leaders and data collectors. They helped inform their respective parent communities of the project, steadfastly supported our efforts, and were invaluable in scheduling the groups and the data collection.

I am especially indebted to Betty Tableman, Director of Prevention Services, Michigan Department of Mental Health, for her belief in the possibility of this program and for her facilitating the financial support of it by the Department. She permitted us the freedom to pursue our vision of this intervention and gently kept us on the path to successful completion of it.

Saul Cooper, Director of the Washtenaw County Community Mental Health Center, was a source of quiet yet firm support of this effort. He was convinced of the need for such a program and through his good offices provided financial support as well.

Professor John Greden, M.D., Chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at The University of Michigan, has a rare breadth of vision of what constitutes mental health services. This type of project would have received little support in most psychiatry departments across the country; Dr. Greden lent emotional and financial support to it over a period of years.

Professor Albert C. Cain, Ph.D., Chairman of the Department of Psychology at The University of Michigan, is a valued friend and colleague of over twenty years. His unshakeable belief in my abilities to develop, implement, evaluate, and disseminate this prevention program has been a source of great pleasure and of renewed emotional strength for me. His facilitating the financial contribution of the Department of Psychology to this project is also much appreciated.

I also wish to thank Sally Pratt who edited my initial draft of this manual. The concepts and activities of this model shine more clearly through her efforts. My thanks, too, go to Lucille Lewsader, who is responsible for typing this manual in its final form.

Neil Kalter, Ph.D.

PART A

OVERVIEW AND PROGRAM ORGANIZATION

I. Introduction

The dramatic rise in the rate of divorce in the United States, Canada, and other western countries is well-documented. The United States Bureau of Census data indicate that now nearly one child in three experiences a parental divorce before attaining the age of majority. Projections based on these data indicate that by the mid-1990s nearly one out of every two children will spend part of his or her time living in a post-divorce household (Glick, 1979). This sociological phenomenon has led to intensive efforts to investigate the potential impact of marital disruption on the social, emotional, and cognitive development of the children involved. An emerging consensus is that parental divorce normally causes immediate and major disequilibrium in the lives of children affecting one or more of the developmental domains noted (e.g., Gardner, 1976; Guidubaldi & Perry, 1984; Hetherington, 1979; Kalter, 1983; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The pioneering work of Wallerstein and Kelly elaborates on the nature of commonly observed reactions of children to divorce. Further, they embed their findings within a developmental framework in which the groupings of pre-school age children, early elementary school, later elementary school, and adolescence are used. Often noted difficulties in the pre-school years include confusion, a strong sense of insecurity, and sadness. Clinging and whining behavior along with bed wetting are not unusual at least initially.

In the **early elementary school years** (grades K-3) intense and pervasive sadness, self-blame/guilt, and some confusion about what divorce means are frequently in evidence. Loyalty conflicts over which parent to side with also begin to emerge. Children of this age are described as the most "defenseless" against these upsetting feelings so that they appear to be the age group most obviously troubled by divorce. An exception is the angry, combative child, often a boy, who is a discipline problem at home and/or at school, but through his aggressive behavior rids himself of painful feelings of helplessness and sadness.

The **later elementary-school age youngster** (grades 4-6) wrestles with powerful angry feelings about the divorce, moderate to intense sadness, self-blame/guilt, and pronounced loyalty conflicts over which parent to side with. Behaviorally, these emotions can be expressed in ways such as open anger or defiance toward the custodial parent (still typically the mother), passive-aggressive "stubbornness" toward the mother and occasionally teachers, and fighting with peers.

The **adolescent's concerns** may include intense loyalty conflicts and an arousal of sexual feelings. The latter is common for adolescents, generally, but when divorce occurs it is often followed by parents beginning to date new people. At just the time that teenagers are attempting to come to grips with their newly emerging sexuality, their parents become visibly active in this sphere. Even if parents are conservatively modest, the ambiance of parent dating often is sexually charged, adding fuel to the naturally occurring adolescent sexual fires. At this developmental stage, conflicts may take the form of sexual misconduct, intense jealousy and anger toward people the parents are dating, and an increased use of so-called "recreational drugs" and alcohol.

In addition to these findings reported in the professional literature by Wallerstein and Kelly as well as others, people who work closely with children in divorce situations find that difficulties often last one to two years. Anecdotal reports from teachers, principals, and mental health professionals repeatedly have underscored the dimensions of sadness/ depression, aggression/defiance, and withdrawal/uninvolvement which seem to characterize different ways children have of expressing the psychological pain they feel when their parents divorce.

Of even more concern are some recent clinical and research findings which suggest that a substantial number of children of divorce seem to suffer from divorce-related conflicts even years after their parents' separation (e.g., Kalter & Rembar, 1981; Kulka & Weingarten, 1979; Wallterstein, 1985). Some believe that the conflicts stirred by the divorce itself live on and harden for some children. Others, including the authors of this manual, think that parental divorce sets in motion a host of subsequent life changes, each of which separately has been seen as a stressor in a child's life.

1. Changes in residence following divorce with the loss of established peer relationships
2. Loss of a familiar school environment
3. Loss of the security of living in one's own house
4. Downward economic mobility with the emotional stress of having to give up a particular life-style and having to become more careful with money, generally
5. Mother's return to or increase in work which leaves children in the care of others for part of the day and reduces the custodial mother's energy and time for child-rearing
6. Parent dating with the threat of losing a parent's affections to that other adult and often some loss of recreational time with the dating parent

7. Remarriage and the plethora of complex adaptations it requires such as forming a reasonable relationship with a stepparent
8. Coping with conflicted feelings of loyalty toward the stepparent and parent of the same gender
9. Accepting the intimacy of the parent's new marriage
10. Adjusting to having step and half-siblings

Though these clinical and research findings paint a gloomy picture for children of divorce, it is important to note that many youngsters, perhaps the majority, appear to cope well with their parents' marital dissolution. After an initial period of surprise, even shock, and a welling-up of sad and/or angry, upset feelings, most boys and girls seem to come to terms with the divorce and regain their developmental stride. Such children not only cope well with the separation and subsequent life changes, but also find opportunities in these changes for new social and emotional growth. It is important to maintain this more positive perspective so that children of divorce do not become stereotyped by the very people who wish most to be helpful.

II. Overview of Developmental Facilitation Groups

This manual outlines a time-limited group intervention for children in grades 4 and 5, including sessions with parents. The sessions with children use displacement methods to enable children to work through post-divorce stresses inherent in the life changes engendered by divorce and its aftermath. For some children who are struggling with painful feelings and difficult life situations, this intervention can be enormously helpful. For others, already coping well with the divorce, the intervention can serve to confirm and lend support to the positive direction they have already begun to take. The intervention is not intended as a substitute for individual or family treatment of long-standing emotional or behavioral disorders, nor can it offset a palpably painful and highly conflictual environment. For youngsters who have been suffering from emotional and behavioral disorders that predate this divorce or who have been living in a chaotic and conflict-ridden environment, this intervention will not be helpful in major ways.

Crisis Intervention vs. Ongoing Stressors

The prevailing view of preventive intervention for children of divorce rests on a crisis intervention model. The premise is that divorce-engendered conflicts and disruptions in social, emotional, and academic functioning are best ameliorated by the earliest possible intervention, one timed as close to the initial parental separation as possible. Implicit in this perspective is the notion that early interventions can serve to "inoculate" children against developing divorce-related difficulties in the future and that children who are most likely to profit from a prevention effort are the ones whose parents have recently been separated. In fact, many programs screen out children whose parents have been divorced for over a year or two.

Though we agree that early intervention holds the promise of reducing immediate levels of distress and may serve to help children regain their developmental equilibrium more quickly, we are impressed by the *long-term, ongoing nature of the psychological tasks confronting the child whose parents divorce*. The stresses of downward economic mobility, shifts in residence, fluctuating visiting schedules, parental dating and remarriage continue well beyond the initial period of marital disruption. In our groups and interviews with research subjects (e.g., Kalter, 1983; Kalter, Pickar, & Lesowitz, 1984; Kalter & Plunkett, 1984), many children clearly gave the message that these post-divorce stresses require as many or more coping efforts than the parental separation, per se. For this reason we choose not to restrict entry into the program to only those youngsters whose parents have recently separated. Instead, we include all children who have experienced a parental divorce at some time in their lives regardless of when the divorce occurred.

The group intervention described in this manual affords youngsters grappling with post-divorce issues such as infrequent or inconsistent visitation by the nonresidential parent, parent dating, and remarriage a chance to focus on and develop better ways of coping with these life situations and the feelings and questions they stimulate. It also gives these children an opportunity to re-examine and re-work old concerns about the marital disruption that they have never fully dealt with. At the same time, children whose parents have only recently separated can see in their peers who are years past divorce that there is indeed "life after divorce."

The more "veteran" group members also can share ways they learned to cope with the initial separation and the painful feelings associated with it.

Group Format

Most of the authors of this manual had had extensive clinical experience working with children and families using individual and family approaches. We were prepared to conclude that group sessions are an efficient approximation to what can be done in individual or family sessions. Instead we found that--though not a substitute for treatment of disturbed children--group sessions constitute a more powerful vehicle for time-limited preventive intervention.

A *group format* works well for several reasons. First, it creates an opportunity for *peer support* that is invaluable in helping children deal with divorce and post-divorce related stresses. The group members are at an age at which what their peers think is extremely important. One's sense of self is more tied to how one fits in with or is like the peer group than is the case for very young children who are still more emotionally invested in home and family. Second, groups provide a sense of "*safety through numbers*" that individual approaches cannot achieve. Within a group, children in middle and later elementary school grades are more likely to feel comfortable expressing ideas, questions, worries, and personal experiences than in a one-to-one relationship with an adult. Third, by using a group format rather than family-focused intervention, children *can be more open* than if their parent(s) and sibling(s) were present as they would be in family sessions. Finally, it is simply *more efficient* to see five to eight children at one time than to see each child individually or with his/her family. But *even if it were not more efficient*, a time-limited, group preventive intervention still has the other advantages over individual or family-focused sessions. Children are simply more able, in a short time, to become comfortable expressing inner concerns, to learn new coping strategies, and to come to understand the normality of being a child of divorce when a peer group format is used.

Content of the Group Sessions

The issues covered in the group sessions were chosen on the basis of our collective clinical experience, a careful examination of the research literature, and the nature of children's concerns as they emerged spontaneously in our experience with the first 25 groups. We expect, however, that as we and others continue to use this model of intervention, new issues will be discovered and incorporated into the array of possible emphases in sessions.

The issues which we focus on include:

1. pre-divorce parental fighting and arguing
2. hearing from the parents that they will in fact be separating and getting a divorce
3. how custody is determined and how much say-so a child may have in that decision
4. visiting with the noncustodial (or nonresidential) parent
5. parent dating
6. the child's relationship with live-in partners and stepparents
7. remarriage and "blended" family life

In addition, the first session utilizes a group storytelling method both as a way of having children to begin being comfortable discussing divorce issues in each other's presence and to provide a "diagnostic sense" of the sorts of concerns and experiences represented in a particular group. The seventh session makes use of a group newspaper as a vehicle for summing up what the group has covered and as a way of providing a concrete product and remembrance of the group. In the final session, a group-ending party permits children and group leaders a chance to reminisce and say "good-bye" to one another. The bulk of this manual focuses on the details of each session and how themes are dealt with in each.

Intervention Objectives. This group intervention has five major objectives:

1. To normalize the sense and experience of being a child of divorce
2. To clarify divorce-related concerns and questions that can be upsetting and confusing
3. To provide a safe place for children to experience and re-work emotionally painful aspects of parental divorce and post-divorce life
4. To help youngsters share and develop coping skills for particularly troubling feelings and family interactions
5. To communicate to parents the nature of the concerns, conflicts, and questions children of this age may have when their parents have divorced

Normalizing Experience. Normalizing the child's experience with divorce is achieved largely through hearing group members tell about their experiences. Group leaders should consistently underscore the commonplace nature of the myriad of concerns and feelings children often have when their parents have divorced. The children are served best when they see that their private feelings, questions, and worries are in fact shared widely and that they are not unusual (e.g., bad, weak, silly) for having them. Pointing out the prevalence of divorce is usually of no help.

Clarify Concerns. Group leaders help children clarify divorce-related concerns and questions by providing relevant information. Leaders can help lay to rest worries based on misconceptions or inaccurate information. For example, the leader can explain the procedures for determining custody and what a child's role can and cannot be in this decision, given a particular state's laws about custody determination. Group leaders also need to examine the reasons why adults divorce so that children can be relieved of the burden of self-blame.

Re-work Painful Aspects. Children of divorce need a chance to experience and re-work psychologically painful aspects of parental divorce. This can be accomplished by re-creating key divorce experiences via role-playing. So, for example, the feelings of helplessness, fear, and self-blame that so often accompany parent arguments can be resurrected by having the group leaders role-play a pre-divorce parent fight. These feelings emerge easily for many children, even those whose parents have been divorced for many years. It is as if the fights had been so traumatizing that the reactions to them lie only slightly below the surface. Having those feelings re-emerge, in the controlled setting of a group, permits many youngsters to examine them anew and come to better terms with them.

Share and Develop Coping Skills. Children can share coping skills they have learned. The children have found ways for successfully dealing with troublesome feelings and family situations which can be supplemented by group leaders. For example, how can a youngster cope with parent arguments? Some children have suggested that going to a friend's house to play or going to their room to play records or a game helps them avoid painful feelings stirred up by their parents' fights. Group leaders should support these ideas. Children cannot stop parents from fighting nor can they prevent such fights by being especially good or helpful. Group leaders should emphasize that divorce and parental fighting are "grown-up business" and that it is best if kids stay out of it.

Communicate with Parents. Finally, parents need to be sensitized to concerns children may have after a parental separation and divorce. The pre- and post-group meetings with the parents (see Part D on Parents' Sessions) and the children's divorce newspaper help to do this. Group leaders can articulate and give examples of concerns that emerged in the course of the sessions without identifying which child voiced them. In this way, confidentiality is maintained yet parents are informed of the nature of children's questions, worries, and feelings. The divorce newspaper permits the children to share the content of the group sessions in summary form. Most parents report that their child gave a copy to them or left it out where it could easily be read.

In conducting more than thirty groups in nine schools (in four school districts) of varying socioeconomic status, we have found that children are eager to participate in the groups and that only a very small percentage drop out. Parents of children who have been in a group report that their children seem much more openly communicative about divorce issues, seem less tense and upset, and are generally happier. In "exit interviews" of children (not conducted by the group leaders), the overwhelming majority of children reported that the group experience was very positive, especially the chance to hear about other children's feelings and experiences and the chance to talk to other youngsters about what their divorce experiences were like (Kalter, Pickar & Lesowitz, 1984). According to parents, most of the children had not talked to them about the divorce nor would they talk to others (e.g., siblings, peers, counselors) about it. To paraphrase what many youngsters said to interviewers and parents alike, "It gives you a chance to get a lot off your chest and see that you really are 'okay.'"

III. Group Organization

Recruitment

Selecting Group Members

In our school-based program we sent home with every child in the grades of interest at a particular school a description of the groups (see Appendix A) and a consent form (see Appendix B). All children whose parents sent back a signed consent form to the school principal were given the opportunity to participate in a group. Approximately 25% of lower socioeconomic status (SES) divorced parents and 50% of middle and upper-middle SES divorced parents consented to having their children participate.

Many children who did not have a signed parental consent form openly and eagerly expressed a wish to participate in the groups. They were given additional copies of the description and consent forms, and if their parents returned signed consent forms, those children were assigned to groups.

Under 3% of the children refused or subsequently dropped out of a group after their parents had given permission for them to participate.

Group Composition

Once a pool of candidates for the groups was established by having parent consent, children were assigned to groups by taking the following factors into consideration: 1. Children of the same grade or only one grade apart (at most two) were placed in the same group; and 2. An attempt was made to have an equal number of boys and girls in any given group. No attempt was made to group children according to how recent the divorce was, whether they were in a single-parent or remarried household, or by custodial arrangement. While one may choose to use some or all of these factors for establishing group composition, we found that *heterogeneity* of these dimensions often was helpful in dealing with many divorce issues.

Size of Groups

We set *five as our minimum number* for a group and *eight as the maximum*. Five seemed the smallest number which would afford the development of both a sense of group cohesion and "safety in numbers." At times one or two children missed a session so that a group that began with five could have three or four children present at a particular session. The infrequent occurrence of a youngster dropping out of a group part of the way into the eight sessions could reduce the number in a given session by yet another child. In elementary school, children find comfort in having a "buddy" or two with whom they can feel a special closeness and this person is nearly always a peer of the same sex. Reducing the number below five would mean that at least one child would have at most only one peer of the same sex. Thus, five seems the bare minimum with which to begin a group.

Though we have conducted groups with as many as ten children, eight seemed to be a better maximum number. The amount of "air time" in a 45 or 50 minute session is very low with more than eight children plus the two group leaders. With ten members (eight youngsters and two group leaders), the average per person time speaking in a 50 minute session is only five minutes. Since the group leaders tend to be more active than the children, each child actually averages less than five minutes "air time" per session. Issues of major personal import are raised in the sessions and often are accompanied by strong feelings. Children who are not given enough time to verbalize thoughts and feelings tend to become quite frustrated and tense. We have observed an increase in roughhousing, giggling, interrupting one another, and walking around the room when more than eight children are in a group. And in fact, we have found six or seven to be an optimal number of group members.

Co-Leaders

A co-leader model that utilizes a male-female pair works well for several reasons. First, the nature of our role-playing method often depends on having a male and female adult as members of a group; parents fighting, telling children about the divorce, a parent and a prospective mate interacting together with the children, and other of our scenarios are far more compelling (while permitting children to remain in their position as youngsters) than trying to have children take an adult role. Initially, we attempted to have children occasionally play a parent, but they seemed to feel anxious and/or self-conscious in that process. The result was an increase in teasing among group members, giddiness and giggling, unlikely "parent" behavior, and too much attention focused on the acting ability of the participants.

Second, a useful and unanticipated by-product of using co-leaders is the opportunity to model a positive adult male-female relationship. Though the co-leaders "argue" in their role of parents in certain skits, the children clearly see a man and a woman who can work together constructively: they can talk about difficult feelings and they show respect and caring for one another.

Third, since both boys and girls are in the group, it is helpful to have an adult of the same sex for each child to look to as a model or for special understanding. In our groups, boys frequently sat next to the male group leader and girls clustered around the female leader, especially when they had particularly strong or conflicting feelings about what was being discussed.

Finally, on a practical level, the freedom of the group interactions is made more possible with two adults present to attend to management issues that surface in any group. The topics discussed can be "hot" and children do begin to roughhouse, giggle, and interrupt one another. The flow of discussion can be better facilitated when two adults are present to handle these matters.

Facilities

All of our groups were conducted in a public school setting. Having such groups at a community mental health center, child and family service agency, or church could also be successful.

A quiet, private room of adequate size is essential for holding these group sessions. The room ideally should have a door which can be closed during meetings to ensure privacy. It should be large enough to accommodate comfortably eight children, two group leaders, and chairs in a circle for all. Too small a room makes youngsters more uncomfortable when emotionally charged issues are discussed. Yet if the room is too large (e.g., a standard classroom or a school cafeteria), too easily it permits children an opportunity to remove themselves from the effective "psychological space" of the group interaction.

The meaning of the room to the children also should not be overlooked since it can affect group interaction in subtle ways. Using a "detention room" or room to which "slow learners" typically are sent for tutorial help can negatively affect the children's perception of the group experience and of themselves.

Group Format and Structural Components

Scheduling

Our developmental facilitation groups met once per week for 45 to 55 minutes (depending on a school's activities) for eight weeks.

Length of Sessions. Some sessions began late or ended early so that only 30 or 40 minutes were available. Conversely, a few times we permitted sessions to extend beyond an hour because of strong requests from the youngsters and the absence of a school activity immediately following a particular session. The nature of the activities and of group process has convinced us that 45 minutes should be the minimum length for a session, with sixty minutes being optimal. Some sessions can extend beyond the usual length if the children spend a great deal of time trying to persuade group leaders to have each session keep going "just a little longer." In general, we suggest that once the length of session is established, be it 45 minutes, 55 minutes, or an hour, that the leaders should adhere to the time limit. Group leaders can empathize with and articulate children's wishes to be given more time, to avoid getting back to certain schoolwork, or to gain closure on a particular issue. It is quite often best not to simply permit some sessions to go beyond the agreed upon time.

Number of Sessions. What is the optimal number of sessions for a group? Increasingly we are finding that eight sessions are too few to accomplish the goals we have set. Not only have we found more salient divorce-related topics than there are sessions (with eight sessions), children often want to continue discussing a particular issue in a subsequent session. Similarly, discussion of some topics becomes compressed due to the constraint of an eight-session format. For example, the three role-playing scenarios described in Part B, "Alternative Session C--Remarriage and Stepparenting Issues" could be dealt with in more depth quite easily by having a separate session devoted to each of those three skits and the discussion of the issues which they encompass.

However, we must keep the number of sessions reasonable. If the groups are conducted during school hours, some time working on academic subjects is lost, a concern to us as well as to school personnel and parents. If groups are held after school, at a child and family agency for example, the level of parent motivation required to continue bringing a child to sessions week after week will most likely result in a greater number of dropouts and fewer parents agreeing to having their children involved in such groups, or both. A tension between wanting to have more sessions so that more might be accomplished (and in greater depth), and the demands of schoolwork and on parent time and energy lead us to suggest a minimum of eight and a maximum of twelve sessions for a group. It is best to have the total number of sessions set in advance and be known to parents and children at the outset.

Those planning to conduct more than eight sessions can still easily use our manual. Our experience suggests dividing Alternative Session B and/or Alternative Session C into additional sessions by having the several role-playing scenarios in each be spread across two sessions. For example, a ten-session group could have the skits "Awaiting the Noncustodial Parent" and "A Weekend with the Noncustodial Parent" appear in one session and have the skit "Returning to the Custodial Parent" be the heart of the session immediately following. This leads to a nine-session (one additional session) format. Still another additional session can be obtained by having a separate session for "The Stepparent's Role in Discipline," a topic that appears in "Alternative Session C." If both of these options were exercised, a ten-session format would result.

Sequence of Sessions

The current program is divided into eight sessions. The Table of Contents lists Sessions 1, 2, 3, 7, and 8, or five of the eight sessions. The Table of Contents shows three sessions that are labeled Alternative Sessions A, B, and C, to make a total of eight. This format encourages group leaders to have the first three sessions and the last two sessions occur in the order in which we have presented them. However, the sessions listed as alternatives can occur in different orders. Depending on the nature of the concerns in a particular group, the co-leaders may choose to present Alternative Session C as the fourth session, whereas with another group the leaders may choose to have Alternative Session A be the fourth session. In short, the co-leaders should order or sequence the material described in the alternative sessions. Their decisions can be based on their own sense of the most salient issues for the particular group.

Further, co-leaders may wish to delete some material in the alternative sessions if it does not appear to be centrally relevant to a particular group. For example, if all or nearly all of the group members are living in single parent families, the co-leaders may choose to delete Alternative Session C and instead spend additional time on the material in one or both of the other alternative sessions. In such a group, issues related to remarriage and stepparenting may be of minimal relevance. Perhaps it would be more relevant to emphasize the material in Alternative Session B related to visiting issues and parent dating.

Techniques for Conducting Groups

Now that we have discussed the structural features of the groups (e.g., the number of children in a group, the use of co-leaders, the length of sessions, the number of sessions, etc.), let us turn to the substantive aspects of our group intervention. The heart of this intervention is the use of displacement activities to facilitate children's expression of thoughts and feelings.

Displacement methods are well-known to many child therapists. Puppet play, drawing, and the use of dolls are facets of traditional play therapy. The use of displacement permits youngsters to talk about, observe, and gain further understanding about their private feelings and ideas. It avoids direct questioning and discussion about a particular child's inner life. Most children, even early adolescents, react to direct confrontation with defensive shrugs of "I-don't-know" or silence. Occasionally, a particularly verbal child will substitute adult-approved "party-line" types of statements for these more common defenses. Responses to displacements stand in sharp contrast to these defensive reactions. Children usually can be engaged easily when their conflicts, fears, worries, and wishes are presented "one step removed" in a displacement. Talking about a doll figure's or puppet's angry, sad, and upset feelings is much easier for the vast majority of youngsters than attempting to bare their souls directly to another.

Co-leaders need to understand and use displacement activities. In the first session, the co-leaders create a group story about an imaginary family in which the parents are arguing and are headed for a divorce. This group story-telling procedure results in rapid involvement on the part of most children, unlike the eyes-downcast, defensive, monosyllabic replies one gets when directly asking children to describe their parents' divorce and their feelings about it. Similarly, the role-playing scenarios in the session that follow are akin to puppet and doll play, only here the "materials" are the group leaders, and in later sessions, the children themselves.

The majority of children find this format comfortable and engaging. In the course of the story-telling and the skits, most youngsters spontaneously volunteer salient aspects of their parents' divorce as well as their own ideas, feelings, and questions about it.

Summary

The major facets of our intervention are

+ an initial and ending meeting with parents
+ recruitment of participants through the schools
+ five to eight children per group
+ an approximately equal number of boys and girls
+ children in the same group within a grade of each other in school
+ not more than one or two clearly disturbed children per group to prevent skewing the group process and keep the group manageable
+ one male and one female co-leader per group
+ sessions with a fixed time limit that last 45 to 60 minutes
+ 8 to 12 sessions per group, with that number clearly stated to parents and children at the outset
+ use of "displacement" activities (e.g., group story-telling, role-playing) to facilitate the expression of ideas and feelings

The next section describes in detail the eight sessions, including their materials, rationale/purposes, aims/goals, and activities. The roles of the group leaders and samples of specific things they might say to children are illustrated. Also included is material on the pre- and postgroup meetings between the leaders and parents.

PART B

CHILDREN'S SESSIONS: GUIDELINES AND CONTENT FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS

Session 1: Introductions and Group Story-telling

Materials

notepad and pencil

newsprint or some other large sheets of paper (taped to the wall or placed on a tripod before the session begins)

scotch or masking tape

magic marker

Facilities

In a room that affords privacy, arrange the seating in a circle with leaders spacing themselves evenly throughout the group rather than next to each other.

Rationale/Purposes

In the first group session, give the children a general sense of the nature of the group. When children come to the first session, they are understandably unclear about the purposes of the group as well as the reasons for their being in the group. In addition, while some children may know one another, many youngsters, even within the same grade and school, may not be acquainted before attending the group.

Because children rarely talk to one another about their divorce-related experiences, one major thrust of this first session is to help the children become comfortable talking about divorce issues in the presence of each other. In this way we can begin to develop a sense of group among the youngsters and the group leaders.

The first session also serves as a "diagnostic" session. In this session group leaders begin to obtain an idea of the past and current experiences of the children in their group, and also of the particular feelings, questions, ideas and worries that are centrally relevant to the members of their particular group.

Aims/Goals

1. To *convey to the youngsters the general goals for having the group*. Emphasize that all children have ideas, questions, and worries about their parents' divorce and that talking about them can be helpful. The children need to know that they are not being singled out because of particular problems they are having, but that the purpose of the group is to serve as a forum for discussing divorce-related issues.

2. To *introduce the group leaders* to the children.

3. To *have the children introduce themselves*. Within our particular project, the groups were conducted at schools. However, we still found some children who did not know one another prior to meeting in the group.

4. To *gather information about children's current living arrangements*. To understand what *may* be relevant issues for the children in a particular group, it is helpful to know with which parent the child is living, whether other adults besides the parent live in the house with them, number of brothers and sisters, and whether or not any stepsiblings or halfsiblings are living with them. Clearly this day-to-day milieu will influence the concerns children have.

5. To *obtain from each child a "divorce history" including when the divorce occurred, briefly what it was like, and with whom and where they lived in the initial period of separation*. These very brief thumbnail

sketches the children give of their parents' divorce can be helpful in uncovering specific concerns that children have as well as serving as a vehicle for having the children share the range of divorce experiences represented in the group.

5. To begin to build a sense of group cohesion among the participants. Not only are the children introduced to one another but they are also introduced to each other's "divorce histories" as well as to each other's current living situations. As they begin talking about these issues, and as they mutually participate in the construction of a group story, they begin to feel a sense of kinship within the group.

See subsequent sections for more details.

Activities:

Minutes		
5 to 10	1.	The leaders introduce themselves to the group. This is followed by a brief discussion of the goals and purpose of the group.
5 to 10	2.	Ask each child to tell his or her name and describe their current living arrangement as well as what their parents' divorce was like for them.
5 to 10	3.	Present the rules of the group to the children.
25 to 30	4.	Present the story activity (displacement activity).

1. Beginning the Group: Introductions and Group Purposes

After all the members are present, the **leaders introduce themselves and ask the children if they know why the group is meeting.** Usually this elicits a variety of responses from "I don't know" to "to talk about things" to "it's about divorce." The leaders initiate a brief discussion about the purpose of the group.

Leaders

Ask children why discussing divorce might be a helpful thing to do. Occasionally, this leads to a discussion, but sometimes not. **Ask how they found out about the group and what they thought when they heard about it.** The purpose of these questions is to get some initial sense of what expectations the members are bringing to the group.

At times, this may lead to a discussion about what divorce is or what separation is as well as other definitional issues. At other times, children will emphasize that divorce causes children problems. When this surfaces, it is important to let the children know that they are not there because they have problems, but to have a chance to discuss the kinds of feelings, ideas, and questions that children normally have when their parents separate and divorce. Leaders may say:

> "We know divorce can be a hard thing to happen in a family and that most kids that we know usually have lots of questions, ideas, feelings, and even worries when their parents split up."
>
> "It's sometimes hard for kids to know what to do with these questions and feelings, and it can be very helpful to have a chance to talk about them."

Tell the children that you talk with a lot of children (at many different schools) whose parents have divorced and find that meeting in a group with other boys and girls whose parents have divorced can be a good way to help with some of these questions and feelings. Often this leads to a spontaneous sharing by the youngsters of personal information. Accept these self-disclosures but do not attempt to initiate discussion of them. Acknowledge that these are some of the events, feelings, and questions that occur when parents divorce, and that many children experience the same sorts of things. From the start, emphasize normalizing the child's sense of having parents who have divorced--the universality of events and children's questions, feelings and worries about them.

Tell the children that the group will be meeting at this particular time in this same room for eight weeks and ask them please to remember to come on time.

2. Children Introduce Themselves

At this point **ask the children to give their names along with their current living situations** (with whom they live, including natural and step relations) **and when their parents got divorced as well as their visitation arrangements. Ask them to include where the noncustodial parent lives and how often they visit the other parent.**

One of the group leaders should write this information on his/her notepad as it is often useful in planning for future sessions. For example, if nearly all children live in remarried families with a mother and stepfather, more emphasis may be placed on dealing with remarriage issues than say with dating. Occasionally, children ask each other questions or directly compare their situations. Group leaders may wish to make some statements about the similarities and/or varieties of situations that are reported. Although spontaneous discussion often gets started, this is neither particularly encouraged nor discouraged.

Play the Name Game after the "divorce history" information is shared. In this activity each member is given a chance to see if they can remember the names of the other group members, leaders included. This usually is a pleasurable activity, easily mastered by the children. It also helps the leaders remember names. Children feel good about having their names remembered both by other members and especially by the group leaders.

3. Rules of the Group

Describe the rules of the group. Explain that it is a good idea to have some rules to help the group go well and so that everyone will feel comfortable about sharing in the group. It is best to wait for about 15 minutes before discussing the rules. The reason for having the group, the "divorce history" and the Name Game collectively, is to give the children a feeling for the helpful and open stance of the group leaders. Introducing rules too quickly can create a regimented, overcontrolled atmosphere in the group. Suggested rules are given below.

1. Listen without interrupting; everyone will have a chance to speak if they would like to (tell the children that it is very hard to speak if others are interrupting and that it's very frustrating to be interrupted and that it is also very helpful to hear about the experiences that other children in the group have had).
2. Say nothing or say "pass" if you just want to listen rather than speak.
3. Do not tease or do putdowns; we don't want any feelings to be hurt.
4. Remember--and this is important--that everything that is said is confidential. What other children say should not be discussed with people outside of the group. Emphasize this rule.

You will probably need to **explain confidentiality.** Ask the children if they know what this word means. Some children will volunteer a synonym such as "top secret." Discuss the meaning of the concept to make sure that it is understood. Point out that each member has the right to tell anyone what he or she has said. This last caveat is important in that the youngsters sometimes think that they are not permitted to talk about their concerns with their own parents or someone else who is important to them.

4. The Group Story (20 to 30 minutes)

Introduce the idea of a group story. Ask the children if they have ever made up or written stories. Usually they all say they have. The leaders then explain that "the group is going to make up and write a story, but that this will be a little different because the whole group is going to make it up together and everyone will have a part in deciding how the story goes."

Explain that once the story begins each person in turn will add a sentence to the story and in that way the group will make up a story together.

One of the leaders stands by the newsprint (or other large sheets of paper taped to the wall) in order to **transcribe the story.** No interpretive comments are made during the telling of the story. The group leader not transcribing the story (and sitting with the children in a circle) can add to the story or pass.

Tell the group that the story will be about a family with two children. The children in the family are designated as a boy and a girl, one the age of the group members, the other about three or four years younger in order to provide an opportunity for group members to express less "grown-up" feelings and behaviors through that figure's role in the story.

Ask the children to suggest the family name and the names of the children. Avoid using names of individuals familiar to the group members.

Tell the group that the story is about a family in which the parents are "headed for divorce" and that we do not know exactly what will happen. That will be up to the group.

Begin the story with "One evening Mr. and Mrs. X were having an argument." The story then passes from one child to the next. Each youngster adds whatever he/she chooses to the story. The leaders' response should be one of complete acceptance with comments kept to a minimum. Often members take the opportunity to "pass" and this, too, is received matter-of-factly by the co-leaders. Children who do pass usually participate after a while.

Leaders

1. If the story is progressing adequately, leaders may pass.
2. Leaders may wish to shift the action to another focus that is relevant to the issues in question. For instance, if the parents' argument has been well elaborated, a leader may contribute, "Upstairs, Bob and Sue (the children) were overhearing this," thus shifting the focus to what is happening for the children in the family.
3. At times, leaders may add either a complete sentence or a sentence stem to stimulate elaboration by the group. These stems can either further the action of the characters in the story or elicit thoughts and feelings of the imaginary family's members. An example of the former would be, "Upstairs Bob and Sue were . . ." For the latter, a leader may add, "When Bob heard his father yell (an action already described in the story by the children), he thought/felt. . . ."
4. In general, leaders do not try to change the gist of the story but rather let children explore the issue already under discussion.

Leave about 10 minutes at the end of the session to discuss the story. **Tell the group when the last time to go around the circle has come.** Designate who will be the last to add to the story and suggest that the group begin to bring the story to a close.

Discussion

When the last addition to the story is made, **read aloud the transcription** (which appears on the large sheets of paper taped to the wall). **Invite a discussion about the story;** ask the group members what they noticed about what happened and how the people in the story felt. Very often a leader will go through the story sentence by sentence asking very specific questions about why the group members think a particular event happened or why one of the family members felt the way he/she did. At relevant points, group leaders should make summary statements about what the group seems to be saying about how children feel.

This activity is uniformly successful in engaging nearly all children in a group. Youngsters seem very ready to discuss and elaborate divorce issues within the safety of this sort of displacement activity. Below are some examples of the material this activity elicits:

1. Worries about angry and/or sad feelings getting out of control, such as themes of angry feelings resulting in hitting, shooting, or inadvertent injury such as an accident
2. Worries about who will take care of the children
3. Children wanting to run away
4. Children feeling that they are left to care for themselves with little help from adults
5. Anxiety that family members will get hurt
6. Children wanting to have a happy or "fairy tale" ending to the story that will bring the parents back together

The events, feelings, and ideas that emerge in the course of the storytelling will emphasize the kinds of things many children have on their minds when parents separate and divorce.

Leaders may make comments such as the following, depending on which themes are present in the story:

> "It seems that a lot of kids have worries about who will take care of them and where they will live when their parents split up."
>
> "When we talk to kids about divorce it seems that a lot of them get nervous about angry feelings and that maybe someone would get hurt when their parents fight."

In this way, the internal experiences of being a child of divorce, expressed in the safety of the story-telling displacement, can be accepted and labeled as normal reactions to divorce.

Note that the group leaders' verbalizations are at a general level. Comments are phrased in terms of what "kids" think rather than addressing a particular child directly. This use of "universalized" communication makes it easier for children to hear what group leaders have to say than would be the case if a specific child were being addressed.

The story can be quite useful as a diagnostic device for permitting concerns or themes which are salient for particular group members to emerge. In addition, the particular defensive style which characterizes the children can be seen in their responses to the story. Examples of children's concerns may be indicated by shifting the story to themes of sadness, aggression being out of control with the possibility of someone being hurt, the one who denies that the divorce will really happen, and the child who must make everyone in the story as happy as possible. Having this sort of information can be useful in anticipating issues that may emerge in subsequent sessions. In short, the story-telling activity has proven to be a successful first session endeavor in that it elicits children's concerns about the divorce in a nonthreatening way, communicates to the members the sorts of things the group will discuss, and begins the process of building a sense of group cohesion that will allow the youngsters to make better use of the intervention.

Session 2: Pre-divorce Fighting between Parents

Materials

None.

Rationale/Purposes

For most families, separation and divorce are preceded by a period of high parental conflict that is most often extremely distressing for children. The separation and divorce are two points along a continuum of the breakdown of family cohesion with subsequent reorganization into a new family system. Children's understanding of the rupture in family relations is often intimately connected to their sense of and reactions to parental fighting, usually both before and after the actual divorce. (Though the focus is on pre-divorce parent arguments, our group members have told us repeatedly that hostile interactions between parents often occur as much after the divorce as before.) In this session, focus on the issues of interparental hostility as well as on children's more general understanding of the reasons that parents divorce.

Aims/Goals

1. To permit children's thoughts, feelings, questions and worries concerning pre-divorce conflict between parents to emerge. Children often express a variety of themes about interparental hostility, including worries about anger escalating into violence and fears that someone will get hurt, fears about their own safety and security, confusion and/or self-blame about the causes for divorce, feelings of helplessness, and loyalty conflicts around siding with one or the other parent.

2. To normalize children's concerns about their parents' fighting so that they realize that their ideas, feelings, and worries are not unusual, bizarre, or unique to them.
3. To correct faulty and egocentric perceptions of interparental conflict. Some children may worry that they are the cause of their parents' fighting and that they can in some way prevent this hostility and prevent the marital rupture.
4. To provide coping strategies for dealing with the anxieties elicited by their parents' hostility.

Activities

The skit in this session has three scenes:

1. The parents argue with one another
2. The group leaders play two children who have overheard the parental arguing and discuss it themselves
3. A return to the parent argument which has escalated to the point that the father walks out of the house (a very brief scene)

The group leaders should perform these scenes standing up with the group members being the audience. When the skits are stopped and discussion invited, the group leaders should rejoin the group by seating themselves in the circle of the group. This provides a concrete separation between the group leaders as actors in a skit and the group leaders as adults who are there to be helpful to the youngsters.

These scenes are not carefully and precisely scripted. Group leaders and children say somewhat different things from one group to another. What is presented here are samples of dialogue which we have observed and found useful.

Briefly **review the story from the previous session** as a way of providing some continuity between sessions as well as highlighting important themes. Focus on that part of the story that deals with the parents' fighting.

Scene 1: The Parent Argument (4 to 5 minutes)

Tell the children that the group leaders are going to do a skit in which they will play parents who are arguing. Invite the children to make up names for the parents; this serves to involve them in the activity in a structured way and emphasizes that this is play-acting with made-up characters.

The arguing in this first scene is fairly mild to begin with but there should be a gradual increase in the intensity of the anger. The content of the argument can include coming home late from work, the quality of food, finances, and household responsibilities. Initially these issues are kept deliberately vague so as not to "cue" the group members regarding the reasons for this couple's disharmony.

Children often react to seeing adults fighting even in a role-playing situation. Occasionally leaders become a bit too enthusiastic in their enacting of an argument. This can result in the children becoming overly anxious which often is expressed in their becoming silly, giddy, or excited. Leaders need to keep a watchful eye on the group's response to the skits and stop the action if they seem to be getting too anxious.

Dialogue

Mr. X: (Walking in from the hallway) I'm home!

Mrs. X: (stirring a pot on the stove) Don't tell me you're home! Where have you been? Dinner's ruined!

Mr. X: I told you I had to work late.

Mrs. X: That's the third time this week. I'm sick and tired of cooking for you and then having it get cold and then throwing it away.

Mr. X: Well if you didn't serve the same old junk night after night, maybe I'd make more of an effort to get home.

Mrs. X: You think it's easy taking care of a house?

Mr. X: Plenty of wives do fine. Geez, you're just like your mother!

Mrs. X: My mother! What do you mean by that?

(And so on.)

Leaders **Stop action, join the group. Initiate a discussion concerning whether what they have just seen is "what it's like when kids' parents fight."**

Note that by rejoining the group, the group leaders communicate that the anger that erupted in the fight will not spill over into the group itself. This process enables the discussion leaders to model intense feeling as well as to maintain enough distance from the roles played so as to be able to observe the children's reactions. In response to the skit, the children may move their chairs away from the fighting, and there often is a tense silence or nervous giggles.

Children are likely to make comments as follows:

"It seemed real." (They sometimes congratulate the leaders on their theatrical abilities.)

"It was nothing."

"That was way too weak."

One boy recounted how his mom used to "throw knives and dishes."

A girl said that her dad "socked mom in the eye" and they had to call the police.

Discussion

Even this relatively minor argument elicits from many children stories of intense and violent fighting. **Let each child** who wishes to **tell his or**

her story of parents' fighting. A few children deny ever having seen their parents fight. One girl said this but added that she knew that something had happened when, some mornings, she would come downstairs and see the furniture in disarray and her father sleeping on the couch. One can then explore the different ways that children know that their parents are angry or have been fighting.

Throughout all of the naturally occurring self-disclosures by the children regarding what parental fighting was like in their family, the group leaders should **point out similarities and differences** in the children's experiences. In this way, the children can see that others have experiences similar to theirs and also that there is a broad range of styles of parent arguments and possible reactions of children to this marital strife.

When children share these family experiences, it can be helpful to ask, without directly addressing the particular child who has just spoken, "How do kids feel when they see their parents fight like that?"

Help the children separate the nervous feelings they have when parents fight from the frightening fantasies often stimulated by these angry exchanges. For example: "It's frightening for all kids to see parents fight, but sometimes the scary things kids imagine will happen can be even worse than the fight."

Worries about parents maiming or killing each other or abandoning the children are not uncommon, especially among children from a lower-middle or lower-class socioeconomic background.

Some children may be anxious over parents hitting one another and drawing blood. Others worry about a parent becoming intensely unhappy or helplessly ineffective in meeting the children's needs--more prevalent in middle and upper-middle class youngsters.

Care must be taken as these stories of violent, confusing, and unpredictable behavior on the parents' part can be accurate recollections of what has occurred. Not all such comments reflect frightening fantasies.

Though anxiety about parents' fighting is a particularly palpable response to this role-playing scenario, children also often have feelings of helplessness in the face of such marital conflict. Children sometimes express this sense of helplessness by emphasizing their independence or their capacity to stop the fighting. This is an opportunity to stress the fact that the fights of their parents, like divorce, are "grown-up business" and that it isn't helpful for kids or for parents if the kids try to get involved in stopping the fighting or try to get them to make up.

Ask the children what these parents in the skit were fighting about. Is this what parents usually fight about? Do parents fight over other things?

The most frequent responses across all groups have been father's drinking, extramarital affairs, and how to raise the children.

Next, **continue the skit, escalate the anger and incorporate the specific issues** raised by the children.

Scene 1: Continued

Mrs. X: (accusingly) Do I smell alcohol on your breath? Were you at the bar? (If the group has brought up drinking as a reason for the conflict.)

Mr. X: (defensively) So I had a drink. If you weren't such a nag, I wouldn't have to go drink.

Mrs. X: Were you alone? Don't think I don't know what's going on with that new secretary. (If the children have raised the issue of infidelity.)

Mr. X: What are you talking about? Listen, I wonder what you do at home all day. It certainly isn't cleaning because the house is filthy. The kids are always running around wild. You can't even control them. (If the group has brought up childrearing issues.)

Mrs. X: You leave the kids out of this! It has nothing to do with them. It's just between you and me.

(And so on.)

The continuation of the skit usually elicits still more examples from the children of their parents' fights and how frightening that can be for them.

Discussion

Use the interchange between the parents in which the children are mentioned to **discuss whether children can really have something to do with why their parents might be getting a divorce.** Because self-blame is so common, even among older children, it is worthwhile to take this issue up directly and more than once. One girl said that she thought she had caused the divorce because her parents were always arguing over what to do about her bad grades. Another youngster claimed that his dad was tired of paying for his music lessons and braces, and he was tired of never having any money to spend on himself. When ideas emerge that children are somehow centrally involved in the parental conflicts, point out that "when parents are angry they will yell at each other about almost everything, including the kids." **Emphasize that kids aren't responsible for grownups not getting along, that's adult business.** The group leaders need to don the role of experts in divorce and let the group members know--in a direct and straightforward manner--that "children do not cause their parents to divorce or separate: Divorce is grown-up business."

In the skit, as the anger between the parents increases, it is not unusual for the group members to become restless and begin teasing or jostling one another. The group leaders can then use that group process to point out how "sometimes kids get angry, themselves, when they see their parents fighting." Again, use "universalized" statements; do not directly address the children involved in the teasing or jostling.

A general (universalized) statement once prompted a boy to say, "Yeah, one time when my parents were fighting I threw a block through the window."

Kinds of anger. Watch opportunities--such as that presented above by the boy's statement--to discuss various relevant kinds of anger. Help children differentiate among parental anger at one another or at the children and anger children often feel, especially toward parents when their lives are being disrupted by their parents' marital conflicts. Do mention that "kids sometimes have their own angry feelings when they see their parents fighting and that it can be scary to be mad at the parents you love and depend on to take care of you."

Ask the group what children can do when parents are fighting. Here the emphasis should be on helping youngsters articulate clearly a range of adaptive coping strategies for dealing with their parents' fighting and the feelings it stirs up in them.

Children

The children often come up with some distracting activity such as playing the radio or a distancing response like going outside and finding a friend to play with or going to a grandparent's house. These are endorsed by the group leaders.

Usually, at least one child will say that he or she tries to stop parents from fighting. Ask the group if it thinks this is a good idea.

After having already supported the distracting and distancing strategies as being adaptive, children respond to this query about intervening in the fight by saying things like:

"No way, you can get hurt," or

"You can't stop them, just stay away 'til they stop fighting."

This should be reinforced and repeated by the group leaders.

Sometimes, children themselves may note that they will get into fights and misbehave so that the parents' attention is turned away from fighting with each other and onto the children. One boy said he drank a bottle of Woolite when his parents were fighting and they stopped to take him to the doctor.

Helplessness. **Verbalize the underlying sense of "helplessness all kids feel"** while reiterating that children can really do very little about their parents' fighting. Address how such misbehavior may be a way youngsters think they can bring their parents together again after the separation.

Scene 2: The Children's Response

The group leaders then move to the second scene in which they play the role of children in another room who have been hearing the parents fight. One of the children should be the age of the youngsters in the group, while the other, opposite sex child, is a few years younger. (Children will sometimes attribute ideas and worries to the younger child that they are unwilling to admit in themselves, believing them too childish.)

Dialogue

Younger child:	Do you hear them? Mom and dad are fighting again. I'm scared!
Older child:	Don't be scared. Why don't we play a game?
Younger child:	I wonder why they're fighting?
Older child:	I don't know.

Younger child: Maybe it's because you didn't do the dishes like you were supposed to.

Older child: No, it's not that, it's probably cause you're a pain in the neck.

Younger child: I am not! That's not true!

Older child: You're right. They're fighting over something else. They just can't get along.

Younger child: Yeah, and it's worse when dad is drinking.

Older child: Maybe we shouldn't argue like them. We don't have to be just like them. Why don't you put on your new Michael Jackson album?

Younger child: Yeah, but I get to play the side I want.

Older child: Okay.

Discussion

This scene is a vehicle for discussing children's egocentric attribution of self-blame for the interparental conflict and the ensuing divorce. Stress repetitively both in and out of the skits that children do not cause divorce. In this scene, the issue of children's loyalty conflicts also can be touched on in exploring the group's ideas about who was at fault for the fighting and the impending separation. Comments the children make regarding fault can be reflected back to the group:

> "It sounds like some of you think all this is the dad's fault and some of you think it's because of the mom."

Sometimes this issue will surface in the context of the first scene (the parent fight) when the children are asked what is going on between the parents. If it does occur in that context, it can be addressed at that time.

For the child who is extremely angry and bitter toward one parent, the experience of seeing other children who direct their anger toward the other parent can help modulate the often troubling intensity of the child's feelings.

But a particular group may express their anger at only one parent, with everyone jumping on this affective bandwagon. The group leaders can then wonder aloud, "How come everyone is angry with only the mom (or dad) and not mad at the dad (or mom) at all?"

At this point, begin to **explore what they think would happen if the children in the skit got angry.** Perhaps they worry that the mom (or dad) would not want to see them anymore. The idea that one must be on good behavior with one or both parents in order to avoid being rejected is a powerful issue for many children. This idea needs to be articulated so that the children individually can decide what is or is not realistic in their thoughts on this subject. Sometimes a group focuses exclusively on angry feelings in this session. When this occurs it is wise for the leaders to begin looking for opportunities to mention how angry feelings are often easier to express than missing or sad feelings. Take care to give this interpretation (as usual) in a general form, i.e., by talking about "kids" in general or about "the group" rather than singling out individual youngsters toward whom comments are directed.

The discussion after this scene should also **point out and articulate the coping strategies and support the siblings used to help with their feelings about the fighting.** This can be another opportunity to list and review the different things that children can do to help in these types of situations.

Scene 3: Father Leaves

The last scene is very brief and involves still further escalation and fighting between the parents. It ends with the father leaving the house. **Ask the group members what they think is going to happen in this family.**

Children usually chorus:

"They're gonna get a divorce."

However, sometimes one or two children claim the father will come back, that they will make up and that everything will turn out fine.

With a touch of humor label this a "divorce fairy tale" and point out how "most kids want very much for it to be like that even though they know it's not going to happen that way."

At the very end of the session, ask the children where they think the dad is going. Responses to this question can be helpful in planning for the next session which focuses on the parents' "officially" telling the children that they "are going to get a divorce, and dad will not be living here anymore."

Children usually press the group leaders to tell them for sure whether the parents will get divorced, where and with whom the children will live if the divorce does go through, and the like. Tell them that--just like in real life--they will have to wait awhile for the answers.

Tell them that next week the group will find out what happens, and if they want to, they can even be in a skit next time.

Most children readily become involved with the content of the skit. Most appear nearly mesmerized by the interparental aggression of the skit. Even children whose parents have been divorced for many years are quick to respond to the themes expressed. It is interesting to note that most children spontaneously share anecdotes regarding their parents' fighting (after the divorce as well as before) with no prompting from the group leaders. This mutual self-disclosure aids both the process of normalizing the sense of being a child of divorce as well as the process of beginning to develop a feeling of group cohesion.

Session 3: Parents Tell the Children about Their Se

Materials:

newsprint (or large sheets of paper)

tape

magic marker

Rationale/Purposes

The third session continues the chronological unfolding o focused events begun in the previous session. The hostility be in the Second Session sets the stage for what the children have anticipating--the decision to separate. We know from previous (Kalter, Pickar, & Lesowitz, 1984) and from one-to-one research with youngsters who have not been in groups of this sort (Kalter 1984) that *regardless of the degree of pre-separation parental c children are nearly always surprised and shocked* when they final their parents' intention to divorce. By representing interaction parents and children in which the parents tell the children that indeed be separating and getting a divorce, youngsters have a char re-experience the complex array of reactions initially felt when t heard directly about the impending divorce. Feelings of disbelief confusion, anxiety, helplessness, and loss (not only of the noncus nonresidential, parent, but especially of their *family unit* as they always known it) are prominent affective reactions. The children o a myriad of questions (e.g., with whom will I live?, whose fault is divorce?) which in all likelihood have never been articulated to any alone directly with parents.

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Even youngsters whose parents have been divorced for many years--and who were toddlers or infants at the time of divorce and with no clear recollections of it--exhibit feelings and questions similar to those whose parents have separated recently. The session permits children who are currently struggling with immediate reactions to a recent divorce--as well as those who never had the opportunity to examine and come to grips with these issues when their parents separated long ago--an opportunity to explore and come to terms with facts related to their parents' divorce.

Aims/Goals

The aims are repetitious because experience has shown they need to be stressed:

1. To permit to emerge in the safety of the displacement activity the painful feelings and multitude of questions many children have when they first learn of their parents' impending divorce.
2. To normalize children's feelings and questions about their parents' divorce. When children enact these in a skit, when they naturally disclose the fact that they share these reactions about their parent's divorce, and when the group leaders underscore how common these feelings and questions are, children can learn that their reactions are not atypical, bad, or wrong. For many youngsters, this will be the first time they have either articulated these issues or heard other children talk about them.
3. To modulate the painful emotional reactions by interpreting the underlying feelings of loss, helplessness and vulnerability which give rise to the intense anger, confusion, and sense of betrayal. The cathartic value of expressing these feelings also serves to modulate them.

4. To explore the reasons for parental divorce and again address the often persistent misconception that children are in some way responsible for it.
5. To develop and encourage coping skills for communicating with parents, including letting parents know how you feel and asking parents questions about things that are confusing or worrisome to children.

Leaders

Briefly **review what happened in the previous session.** Remind children that Mr. and Mrs. X were having a big fight and the kids were upset about it.

The children will usually add their own recollections at this point and it is useful for the leaders to listen to what they remember. What the children recall as the highlights of the last session can give the leaders an indication of what was most salient to the youngsters.

For example, if the children mention the father's drinking, the mother's affair, or the children's worries about what will happen to them if their parents divorce, the leaders can briefly address these issues.

> "It sounds like a lot of you paid attention to how angry the mom and dad were; that can be real scary to a lot of kids."
>
> "The group seems to be thinking about where the kids of the X-family will live if the parents do split up for good; that's a big worry for lots of kids whose parents are getting a divorce."

After a brief discussion, tell the children that there will be more skits today. The children are usually enthusiastic about the skits. The three scenes of the skit will include:

1. A mild argument between parents as they prepare to tell the children about their decision to separate and seek a divorce

2. The mother telling the children about the impending divorce

3. The father talking to the children about the divorce

Discuss the action after each.

Scene 1: Parents' Discussion About Getting a Divorce (3 to 5 minutes)

The parents discuss the fact that they really are going to get a divorce and that the children must be told. They argue, but the tone is subdued and reflects a resigned attitude on the part of both. Their interaction conveys to the group the sense that the parents are giving up on working things out together and that they will resolve their marital conflicts by separating.

Mrs. X: (in a resigned tone) Well, it doesn't look like we're going to be able to work things out.

Mr. X: I guess not.

Mrs. X: Have you talked to a lawyer yet?

Mr. X: (suddenly animated) You bet I have! You're not going to get all my money!

Mrs. X: (angrily) You're a real jerk, you know.

Mr. X: (bitterly) Sure, sure. It's all my fault.

Mrs. X: (also bitterly) Well you're sure not any prize.

Mr. X: (tiredly) Look, let's just do what needs to be done. I'll see a lawyer and you see a lawyer.

Mrs. X: (resigned) Okay, and we'll both talk to the kids.

Mr. X: Right.

Leaders: Stop the interaction

Begin discussion with "What's happening here?" "What will happen next?"

Children usually say things like "They're giving up."

"They're still arguing but they're going to get divorced."

"And they're going to tell the kids about it next."

"How do kids usually hear about divorce in real life?"

"What do you think is the best way for kids to find out that their parents are going to get a divorce?"

Children typically talk about the way they found out. These include:

1. Overhearing their parents talking about it either to each other or to someone else
2. Having their mom tell them because their dad has already moved out
3. Hearing from older siblings
4. Having their grandmother or grandfather tell them about it

Children rarely report that both parents told them together, though this is the way many children say they think it ought to be done.

Leaders

Accept the children's responses, discuss them, and underscore them.

"It seems that it usually happens about four or five ways, so a lot of kids find out the same way, but some kids find out in different ways. No matter how you find out it's no fun."

If feelings about the divorce have not yet come up in discussion, the last comment usually stimulates some affective expressions. This provides a lead-in to the second scene which deals specifically with the children's reactions to the divorce news.

Scene 2: Mother tells the children about the divorce

In the second scene, when the mother tells the children of the parents' decision to separate and get a divorce, an important change in group process often takes place. For the first time, the children in the group will participate actively in the skit. By this time, children are comfortable enough to be involved in this way without getting giddy or silly and without feeling overly self-conscious.

Select 2 to 4 children (depending on how many volunteer and the maturity level of those who do) to play the children of the X-family. Ask the children to select names and ages. It is interesting to observe children choosing to be a three-year old while others elect to play a teenager. This permits a range of responses along the maturity dimension to emerge, something leaders can comment on in the discussion following the scene.

Before the scene begins, tape sheets of newsprint or other blank sheets of paper to the wall. **Ask the children what kinds of questions kids have when they hear that their parents are going to get divorced, and what do kids want to know and what would they be thinking or worrying about when they hear about the divorce.** As the group generates ideas, one group leader should write them on paper taped to the wall so that all can see them. Leaders may also contribute to this list. **Tell the children that when the next skit starts, they can use some of the questions that have been written down when they are in the skit. Tell the children that they can make up new questions** if they want to. Questions which most commonly surface are listed below:

1. Why are you getting a divorce?
2. Who will we live with?
3. Whose fault is it?
4. Is it our fault?
5. Where will dad (mom) live?
6. Will be be able to see him (her)?

Dialogue

Mrs. X: Children! Come here. I've got something important to tell you.

Kids: (singly or simultaneously they usually say) What? What do you want? Are you and dad getting a divorce?

Mrs. X: You know that your dad and I haven't been getting along too well for a long time. Like last week, we had that big fight you heard.

Kids: (usually they say) Yeah! You were fighting a lot. What were you fighting about? Are you getting a divorce?

Mrs. X: That's what I wanted to tell you about. Your dad and I have decided we can't live together any more. We always fight and never have fun, so we've decided to get a divorce. But even though we're going to get a divorce we both still love you.

Kids: Who are we going to live with? Who gets us?

Mrs. X: Well, I think you'll be living with me. (Most of the children in the group seem to accept this matter-of-factly, though, if they don't, discuss it.)

Kids: Where is dad going to live?

Mrs. X: He's going to get an apartment not too far away.

Kids: Can we see him? When can we see him?

Mrs. X: (angry, upset) I don't know! You'll have to ask him.

Kids: Whose fault is all this? Is it his fault?

Mrs. X: (somewhat tearfully) I don't know, maybe. Maybe it's both of our faults. I don't know. (The reactions of children vary from group to group, but these are typical of the interactions we have observed across our groups. The questioning continues for a while.)

Leaders

After about 20 questions (or sooner, if the interaction seems to be slowing down), **call "time out" and ask the group what they thought about what was happening.**

The children often repeat the questions that the children in the skit asked (e.g., "They want to know who they're going to live with.") Occasionally a more mature, psychologically-minded youngster will add, "The kids are upset, they feel sad about their family breaking up" (or losing their dad).

Pull together the important themes that have been expressed. Examples could include (themes will vary from group to group):

> "It seems like the kids are asking a lot of questions about the dad; maybe they feel they're going to miss him."

> "It sounds like the kids are worried about who will take care of them after the divorce."

> "The kids sure sounded mad when they were asking those questions: who are they mad at?"

Note that such comments are made in a generalized format rather than singling out a particular child by saying something like "Billy was acting like he was mad." The latter type of comment is decidedly unhelpful and can short-circuit a child's active and enthusiastic participation in the group. Comments of the sort suggested most often lead to discussion.

The children will elaborate on them both by focusing on the characters in the skit (e.g., "Yeah, they really are worried about whether they'll see their dad again") and by sharing their own experiences (e.g., "I was really scared about no one taking care of me after the divorce)."

Continually **emphasize how common and normal these reactions are and empathize with the pain of the situation.**

> "I think a lot of kids feel worried about that, it's pretty common, but it sure is a big worry when it's happening."

Begin to make interpretive comments, again in a general form, to help the children understand their feelings, and in doing so, modulate them. For example,

> "Kids feel so sad and helpless because they're sort of losing their family, it won't be the same living with only one parent."

> "You know, a lot of the angry feelings kids have is because they're mad at their mom and dad for messing things up even though they still love their mom and dad. It's okay to have mad and loving feelings toward a mom or dad even though it doesn't feel good right then."

> "A lot of kids feel real upset by the divorce and sometimes it's partly because they think it's their fault, like there was something they could have done to stop it, but divorce really is grown-up business. It doesn't have to do with kids."

Move toward shifting the focus to what children can do to help themselves with their upset feelings and questions. Talk to them about putting their concerns into words. **Encourage children to talk to their parents, to share with them the feelings and questions they have.**

Most often this leads to silence or comments like:

"No way!"

"It's none of my business."

"I can't say that!"

Leaders

Briefly **discuss why it's hard for children to talk to parents.** Some children worry about making a parent angry so that he or she will not want to see the children anymore. Emphasize that parents really do care about kids and that grownups can be a big help if they know what's going on in a kid's mind.

Suggest alternatives for communication such as writing mom or dad a note, drawing a "feelings picture" for them (especially for younger children), or even telling them about some of the things they learned in the group about how children feel about divorce and the kinds of questions they have. In talking to parents after a group is over, we have found that many children use these ways to begin to communicate with their parents around divorce issues. About a third of the parents are quite surprised by their youngster's new-found willingness to talk about things they never could mention before.

Scene 3: Father tells the children

The third scene is similar to the second. Father begins by saying that "I know your mom has already talked with you about this, but I think it's a good idea if I talk to you, too." He then tells the children of the divorce and again the children ask questions. (A new "sibship" is selected from the group to participate in this scene. Some may be a bit more reluctant to do this than the initial volunteers, but they can be helped by having the children who participated in the scene with mother act as "coaches.")

Discussion Time

Call for a "discussion time" and **discuss the previous scene.** In addition to the sorts of comments and interpretations suggested before, the leaders may wish to mention differences they may have noted between the interaction with the mother and the one with father. In some groups these are quite similar, but in others they are strikingly different (e.g., "I noticed that when the kids talked with mom they were sort of easy on her with their questions and they didn't get angry at all, but with dad the kids seemed really mad and really out to give him a hard time." After such a comment the leaders may wish to interpret how "Sometimes kids will worry that if they have mad feelings toward dad (or mom) that they'll sort of get rejected by him (her)." This interpretation of a "splitting" type of defense can serve to modulate some of the angry and upset feelings.

Leaders: Summary

Bring the meeting to a close by summarizing briefly how common and normal it is for the children to have certain feelings, questions, and worries when their parents tell them that they really are going to get a divorce. Briefly recapitulate the issues that surfaced. Emphasize that communicating with at least one parent, whether it be in words, notes, or pictures, is a good way for children to help themselves with their feelings and questions.

Alternative Session A: Custody Issues: The Court Scene

Materials

newsprint (or other large sheets of paper)

tape (Use it to tape newsprint to the wall.)

magic markers

"judge's robe" (usually a black graduation gown)

a gavel

Introduction

This session and the two sessions that follow are entitled Alternative Session A, B, and C. The purpose of them is to permit the group leaders some flexibility in ordering the sessions based upon their assessment of salient themes that have emerged across the first three meetings of a particular group. (See Part A, III.) Though we have always used the eight sessions presented here (due to the demands of our research program), we are convinced that some groups would have profited even more if one of the alternative sessions had been deleted or de-emphasized and another expanded to cover two or more meetings, as described in Session 3 in Part A. Clearly the group leaders' judgment is centrally important in such a decision.

Rationale/Purposes

The enactment of a courtroom skit dramatically engages the children around custody issues. In many states, this skit would not accurately reflect the process for determining custody. In Michigan, for example, children usually are interviewed by a Friend of the Court Office case worker who will then make recommendations to the presiding judge. Some judges prefer to interview children themselves, but this almost always is done privately in the judge's chambers. Nonetheless we chose this vehicle for exploring custody-related issues because it provides a compelling displacement arena for the feelings and questions children have about custody. Further, a surprisingly high number of children watch Divorce Court on television and are familiar with some of the judicial trappings represented therein. Do take care to let children know that this is "play-acting" and that usually if youngsters are questioned about their preferences, it is done by a case worker or judge in private and not as part of a hearing or trial in open court.

The courtroom format provides a comfortable and engaging displacement activity for expressing a range of feelings and questions about custody. The feelings that tend to emerge most prominently include loyalty conflicts about which parent to side with or choose to live with, worries about hurting or alienating one parent, and anger toward one or both parents. Questions which most frequently are voiced are:

Do I pick who I will live with?

Do the judge and my parents have to do what I say?

Can I change my mind later?

What if I want to live with both?

Do I have to pick one parent to live with?

Children seem to think about these issues far more than we generally suppose they do. Even children whose parents have been divorced for a long time wonder how the custody decision was made. And a surprising number of our later elementary school-aged children have already been to see a judge about a change in custody. Others report that their noncustodial parent has

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told them that when they get a little older they can come live with them and that they might have to tell a judge they want to do that. Though some professionals may feel that custody issues are irrelevant or minor for youngsters whose parents were divorced long ago, our experience with children has taught us that custody is, in fact, an extremely salient and emotionally charged issue for this group.

Aims/Goals

1. To permit feelings associated with the idea of having to state a custodial preference to a case worker or judge to emerge.
2. To elicit questions about the process of custody determination, not only for those whose parents have recently separated, but also for youngsters whose parents have been divorced for years and who are still wondering how custody was decided and/or think that they will be participating in the re-opening of the custody decision in the future.
3. To articulate and normalize the painful feelings aroused by custody issues, especially that of conflicted loyalty towards the parents.
4. To clarify the realities of custody determination, especially to put into perspective the relative weight a child's stated preference may have in the court's decision.
5. To address the underlying hurt feelings and sadness that are so commonly associated with not having both parents in one's home and the painful idea (at times probably accurate) that a parent does not want the child to live with him or her. This has important ramifications for a child's feelings of self-worth and it is the child's self-esteem we seek to shore up in attending to feeling unwanted or rejected by a parent.

Activities

Ask the children about what they remember of the previous session. The leaders may choose to discuss briefly the issues they recall. This provides a sense of continuity across sessions as well as a "warm-up" time for the current session.

Refer back to earlier sessions in which the group had discussed concerns and questions children have about who they will live with and how that gets decided. Children usually remember this easily. **Ask how they think this very important question gets decided.**

Children's responses will range from "Your parents decide" to "It's up to the judge (court)" to "The kids say who they want to live with."

Asking how custody is decided can be very confusing and it can bring up a lot of questions and special feelings for kids. **Tell the children that this meeting includes a courtroom skit about custody,** one overall skit with three scenes:

1. The mother's testimony including questions from her attorney and the father's attorney
2. The father's testimony with questions from both attorneys
3. The testimonies of the children involved

This skit is probably the most complex one we do in the groups. Many children participate in the skit and it requires a great deal of cognitive effort.

Role-playing the courtroom custody hearing

After telling the children that the group will be doing a courtroom skit about custody, ask the children what kinds of characters are needed in order to do this. The proposed cast usually includes a judge, bailiff, both parents, their attorneys, the children in the family, and occasionally a court stenographer. The latter usually is omitted from the skit. Because even the nature of these roles can be confusing, leaders begin by discussing definitions of "lawyer," "testimony," and so forth.

The cognitive complexity demanded by the roles in this skit makes it essential to generate two lists of questions written on the newsprint taped to the wall for everyone to see. One list contains questions that an attorney could ask his/her client, questions to make the attorney's client "look good." These often include questions like the following:

1. Would you like your children to live with you?
2. Do you love your children?
3. Do you make enough money to take care of your children?
4. Do you take your children to places like parks, movies, or ballgames?
5. Do you help your children with their schoolwork?

If the children do not suggest many of these questions, the group leaders can add them by saying something like, "How about 'Do you help your children with their schoolwork?'"

Leaders

Ask the children to think of questions that a lawyer might ask to try to make the other parent look bad during cross-examination. Such a list could include:

1. Isn't it true that you sometimes hit your kids pretty hard?
2. Isn't it true you don't earn enough money to support your children?
3. How could you take care of your children when you spend so much time at bars?
4. Isn't it true that you usually don't do very much with your children, like take them places?

Children who are playing the role of an attorney are told that they can refer to these two lists in questioning their client and the other parent or that they can make up other questions if they would like to.

After the two lists have been generated and written down on the newsprint paper, **ask for volunteers** to participate in the skit. By this time in the evolution of the group, most children are quite eager to participate in skits. **Assign children to the various roles but reserve the role of judge for a leader.** The other leader is not given a role so that he/she can serve as a floating coach to all children in their roles. It can be helpful in assigning children to roles to pick the more verbally skilled youngsters to play the attorneys. Children not assigned to a role become the audience in the courtroom. Sometimes we have found it helpful, part of the way through the skit, to designate some of the members of the audience as "coaches" for a particular attorney or parent as a nonthreatening way of involving them in the skit. This skit is sufficiently complicated so that those playing the roles of attorney, parent, and child require extensive coaching from leaders.

Just before the skit begins, arrange the room so that the judge is seated behind a desk at the front of the room, a chair placed next to that desk facing the audience serves as the witness stand, chairs for the mother and her lawyer are placed on one side of the room facing the judge, and chairs for the father and his attorney are on the other side of the room also facing the judge. The children of the family are seated in a separate area as is the audience. (The precise location of these two groups is of no consequence.)

Scene 1: The Mother's testimony

Bailiff: All rise. The ____________ Judicial Circuit Court in the State of __________ is now in session. The Honorable Judge __________ will preside. (Group leaders can fill in the blanks in whichever way makes sense given their location.)

Judge: (enters from outside the room) Be seated. We are now going to hear the case of Mr. and Mrs. X. They are getting a divorce and it isn't clear yet with which parent the kids are going to live. Let's begin. Will Mrs. X please take the stand. (Either parent may be called first.)

Bailiff: Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth (or words to that effect that the child uses, with some coaching from the group leader not participating in the skit).

Mrs. X: (standing in front of the witness stand) Yes, I do.

Bailiff: Sit down.

Mrs. X's attorney: Now Mrs. X, you are a good mother, right?

Mrs. X: Of course, I love my children a lot.

Mrs. X's attorney: And you want the two children to live with you, right?

Mrs. X: Yes. I love them and they love me and I'm sure they want to live with me.

Mr. X's attorney: Objection. She can't say that! The kids haven't been asked about who they want to live with yet.

Judge: You object, huh? OK. Go on Mrs. X.

Mrs. X's attorney: Do you take your kids places, like the movies and parks and stuff?

Mrs. X: Yes, I do. I take them lots of places.

Mr. X: (to his attorney) She's lying! She just lies around all day watching TV!

Mrs. X: I do not, you liar! You're the one who just sits around drinking beer and watching TV!

Both attorneys: Objection! I object!

Judge: (pounding the gavel) Alright, alright! Let's have some order here. No more interruptions of the lawyer questioning Mrs. X. (And so on. Clearly what children in a given group say and how they say it will vary enormously. The above illustration captures one possible unfolding of this session, though the "coaching" done by the group leaders is not given.)

Call for a "discussion time" to stop the skit (after several minutes).

What's happening so far?

The group quickly points out how both parents are trying to make themselves look good and the other parent look bad. If this does not surface, it is a good idea for the leaders to articulate this dynamic and to go on to say that "it must be pretty hard on the kids to hear their parents bad-mouthing each other, calling each other names, and putting each other down. Kids usually care about both parents and it feels crummy to hear that kind of stuff." This often leads to agreement among the children and a sharing of experiences of hearing one parent speak ill of the other. Underscore this problem and ask what can be done about it. Usually children look helpless in the face of this question.

Suggest to the children that they let the parent know it feels bad to hear the other parent put down. As in previous sessions, suggest communicating by using notes to the parents as well as by talking to them.

After Mrs. X is questioned by her attorney, it is time for her to be cross-examined by Mr. X's attorney.

Dialogue continues

Judge: Okay, I think you've asked your client a lot of good questions, now it's time for cross-examination. Do you (Mr. X's attorney) have any questions for Mrs. X?

Mr. X's attorney: I sure do! You said that you take your kids places two times a week. Don't you spend a lot of time drinking in bars?

Mrs. X: (outraged) I do not! I don't drink at all! I don't even drink beer.

Mr. X: She sure does! She drinks like a fish.

Mrs. X: I do not! Liar! Jerk!

Both attorneys: Objection! I object! Shut up!

Judge: (pounding the gavel) Order in the court, order in the court! No more outbursts please. Let the lawyers do their jobs.

Mr. X's attorney: Isn't it true that you don't have enough money to support your children and that you don't even have a job?

Mrs. X: Not true! I work at K-mart and besides he (pointing to Mr. X) is going to pay for support. The court's going to make him.

Mr. X: Oh yeah! You're not getting a cent.

Judge: (pounding gavel) Mr. X, please let your wife have her say. You'll have your turn up here on the witness stand pretty soon. Then, you can say what you have to say. (And so on. Again, the things children say in their roles as parents and attorneys will vary a great deal from group to group.)

As the above dialogue suggests, the children are able to enthusiastically immerse themselves in this skit. The primary theme continues to be parents bad-mouthing one another and the great amount of hostility each parent expresses toward the other.

Leaders

Continue addressing "how angry parents get at each other when they're going through a divorce and that sometimes it's like they become different kinds of people, people filled with angry, hurting feelings instead of caring, loving feelings."

This usually leads to the children amplifying and elaborating this theme with personal anecdotes. **Empathize with these self-disclosures,** point to how common these experiences are for children in order to **normalize this phenomenon** and **underscore the importance of trying to let parents know how bad it makes them feel when parents get so angry at each other. Talk about the idea of children having to hide caring, loving feelings for one parent from the other** (though the children usually raise it implicitly if not explicitly in this discussion). **Emphasize that it is all right to keep caring about both parents** even though children at times might feel that one parent will be angry at them for caring about the other.

Scene 2: The other parent's testimony and cross-examination

This essentially is a repetition of Scene 1, but now the other parent is sworn in, takes the stand and is questioned in turn by his/her attorney as well as the other attorney. The dialogue here typically is very similar to the illustrations given for scene one. The same sorts of themes emerge and need to be addressed by the leaders in similar ways. It is often useful to make this scene somewhat shorter than the first due to its repetitive nature.

Scene 3: The children's testimony

In this scene, each of the children, beginning with the oldest, is sworn in, takes the stand, and is questioned by both attorneys. The tone often shifts from the expansive, combative and somewhat raucous quality present in the first two scenes to a more subdued, serious one.

Mrs. X's attorney: (after the oldest child has been sworn in and is seated)
How old are you?

Child: Fourteen.

Mrs. X's attorney: Are those (pointing to Mr. and Mrs. X) your parents?

Child: Yes.

Mrs. X's attorney: Do you think your mom loves you?

Child: Well, yeah, I guess so, sure.

Mrs. X's attorney: Okay, good. Do you love your mom?

Child: Sure, she's real nice.

Mrs. X's attorney: Do you think you'd like to live with her and have her take care of you like she always has?

Child: Well . . . I, well . . . I'd like to live with both of them really.

Mrs. X's attorney: Yes, but you can't. They're getting divorced and they aren't going to be living together. You have to pick one.

Child: Well, my mom is real nice, when she's not mad, and she cooks real well and plays basketball with me, but my dad, he's a good guy, too.

Mrs. X's attorney (somewhat irritated): You can't have both! You have to pick one. (Again, the considerable "coaching" by leaders is not given here.)

Discussion Time

Underscore how hard it is for kids to be put on the spot like that. "Kids usually really care about both parents and the idea of having to choose one over the other to live with feels awful." This can lead to lively discussion and sharing of personal experiences. During this time the group leaders can pose the question (though often the children raise it) of what to do about this conflict over who to be loyal to.

Children can be educated about the realities of how custody is determined. **Tell them that the child's preference, especially a child under 13 or 14 years old, does not by itself determine custody.**

> Custody is a complicated, big decision; the law says that the judge has to pay attention to lots of other things besides what a kid

> says, like which parent seems more reasonable, which parent has spent the most time caring for the children, whether a parent has what it takes to really raise kids right and a whole lot of other things."

The aim here is to give children a more realistic sense of the custody determination process while relieving them of the burdens of the responsibility and divided loyalties implicit in the idea that they decide custody by talking to a case worker or judge.

Also, **tell the children that they do not have to state a preference when a judge or case worker asks them.**

> "Because the law is complicated and because the judge or court worker usually interviews kids in private, alone, kids can say who they want to live with. Parents sometimes don't have to know exactly what's said to the judge, especially if they tell the judge or court worker that they want it kept private."

The aim here is to reduce the anxiety about alienating or hurting a parent's feelings when the child in fact has a distinct preference he or she wishes to be taken into consideration in the custody decision. Not all, or even the majority, of scenes with children on the stand unfold as the above illustration did. Children often express a clear, black-or-white preference for custody as illustrated below.

Resume Scene 3

Mrs. X's attorney: So now that we've talked a little about you and your mom and dad, who do you think you'd like to live with?

Child: My mom, for sure. She's real nice. She pays attention to my feelings, she helps me with my math homework, and she's really, really nice.

Mrs. X's attorney: And your dad?

Child: He's really mean. He grounds me all the time for picky things like not eating every crumb of my dinner, sometimes he hits me real hard. I don't want to have to live with him!

Mrs. X's attorney: Thank you. Your witness.

Mr. X's attorney: So your mom's really nice to you?

Child: Yeah, she sure is. Not like him (points to father).

Mr. X's attorney: But she's poor. She doesn't have a job. How can she support you and herself?

Child: She does too have a job! A good one. She makes plenty of money. (And so on.)

Often youngsters will tenaciously defend their preference for one or the other parent by extolling his or her virtues and by derogating the other. The group leaders may want to reflect the defensive aspects of this "split."

> "It sounds like some kids really want to live with the mom and think she's great and that the dad is really bad news, but you know usually it doesn't work that way. Usually kids have caring and loving feelings towards both parents, that's what makes living with only one of them so hard. It's sort of like you have to lose the other one. Maybe it makes it a little easier for a while to think one parent is almost perfect and the other is just awful, but I think kids usually care about both. That's what's so sad about divorce, you can't have both of them with you at the same time.

This usually results in obvious expressions of sadness and longing for the noncustodial parent. Be accepting and empathic and **underscore these normal feelings (sadness and longing for the noncustodial parent) children often have when their parents split up.**

One of the more poignant parts of this or any other session is when a child sadly reports having had essentially no contact with a noncustodial parent for years and/or believes that the noncustodial parent does not care about him or her. Furstenberg et al. (1984) have reported that more than one child in three has less than yearly contact with a noncustodial parent (usually father). Bring up that issue if the children do not. Emphasize how common it is and that youngsters feel sad about it. Say that "lots of kids then get the feeling that their dads don't care about them or that maybe there's something wrong with them and that's why their dads stay away (like they aren't smart enough or pretty enough or good enough at sports, and that isn't true"). **Stress that some grownups have trouble being good parents after a divorce,** not because of the kids but because of grown-up worries and problems. Reiterate this theme to help the youngsters feel good about themselves despite minimal or no contact from a noncustodial parent.

Follow-up: The Decision

At the beginning of the following week's session, quickly **review the court skit** as the children eagerly await the judge's decision. The decision may vary with the composition of the group and the skit that has been enacted. Most often the judge awards custody of the children to the mother with liberal visitation rights for the father.

Reaction to the decision is often quite mixed with the faction that supported mother feeling excited by their victory while the father's side feels let down and disappointed. This reaction promotes discussion of the custody battle as a contest between parents that results in a "winner" and a "loser." One girl pointed out how the children are made to feel like "prizes" in the contest. A boy who had testified that he wanted to live with his father angrily protested the judge's decision and threatened to run away. Another boy who was concerned about his father's feelings turned to the person who had played the dad in the skit and asked, "Dad, are your feelings hurt?"

In sum, a wide array of feelings--including relief, disappointment, anger, pleasure and sadness--surface and are discussed. Though it is important to announce the decision in the session immediately following this one, it is equally important to gain closure on the issues as quickly as possible so that the material for the next session can be given sufficient time.

Alternative Session B: Visiting Issues:

Awaiting the Noncustodial Parent

A Weekend with the Noncustodial Parent

Returning to the Custodial Parent

A Group Letter to an Uninvolved Noncustodial Parent

Materials

newsprint

tape

magic markers (for group letter)

Rationale/Purpose

The principal objective of this session is to address the multitude of themes associated with visiting the noncustodial (or nonresidential in the case of joint custody) parent. Visitation evokes a great many feelings and concerns in most children. Particularly prominent themes *regardless of when the divorce occurred are*:

1. Having two parents who do not live with each other
2. The need to give up one parent in order to be with the other
3. Reactions to the friction between parents which so often accompanies "pick-up" and "drop-off" contacts
4. Loyalty conflicts stimulated by competition between parents for the child's affection
5. The split between the reality of living with the custodial parent and the "Disneyland Dad" phenomenon of once a week (once a month, once a year) visits with a noncustodial parent (still typically father)

For children who very rarely, if ever, see their noncustodial parents, nonvisitation is a powerful and poignant issue. Having less than yearly contact with the noncustodial parent is surprisingly common and, as noted earlier, characterizes over a third of all children of divorce. Thus, regardless of how frequently or infrequently a child sees his or her nonresidential parent, that child usually has to deal with many feelings and concerns connected with this aspect of post-divorce life. In fact, for many children it may engender the most significant post-divorce stresses.

Aims/Goals

1. To encourage expression of feelings and thoughts about visits with the noncustodial or nonresidential parent. These may include loyalty conflicts stimulated by parental competition for the child's affections, upset feelings over continued interparental hostilities, and sadness and/or anger over not seeing the noncustodial parent very much or not at all.
2. To normalize these feelings.
3. To develop coping strategies for dealing with these painful feelings and difficult family interactions.
4. To clarify possible reasons for a noncustodial parent rarely visiting or not visiting at all.

Activities

In beginning this session, ask if the children have any thoughts or ideas related to the custody issues talked about last time. Permit only a brief discussion so that the agenda for this session can be given sufficient time.

Remind the children about how many sessions remain. Children easily "forget" the time-limited nature of the intervention, so that these reminders are helpful. This reduces the chances of some children feeling surprised when the final session is at hand and gives youngsters an opportunity to talk about their wishes for the session to continue as well as their sadness about having to say "goodbye" to the group leaders. In some ways, this aspect of group process recapitulates the feelings of loss and abandonment experienced first in the context of the divorce. To that extent, it is useful to begin addressing this issue no later than the fifth session.

Next, **introduce the topic of visitation.** Tell the children that many children visit the parent they don't live with and that kids have feelings and ideas about the visits. Tell them also that many kids don't get to see the parent they don't live with very often and sometimes not at all; this can be hard on kids. Comments of this sort nearly always lead to some sharing of personal experiences along these lines.

Visitation skit (three scenes):

1. Waiting to be picked up by the noncustodial parent
2. The visit
3. Returning to the custodial parent

Involve the group in writing a letter to an imaginary noncustodial parent who rarely or never visits.

The decision on the mix of the visitation skit and the group letter activities is based on the life-circumstances of most of the children in the group and the themes that have surfaced up to this point. For example, if a group is composed nearly exclusively of children who never or rarely see their noncustodial parents, then a skit depicting a child waiting for the arrival of the noncustodial parent may be used in conjunction with the group letter to him. On the other hand, if nearly all do see their noncustodial parents fairly frequently (if not regularly), then the group leaders may choose to eliminate the group letter and focus exclusively on the skits about visitation.

As noted at the beginning of the last chapter, leaders who plan to conduct more than eight sessions may decide to deal with visiting issues across two sessions, perhaps emphasizing both the visiting scenes and the group letter to the unavailable noncustodial parent.

Ask the children to tell the group briefly about their current visiting arrangements. Go around the circle, and as always, those who choose to do so may pass (though this is quite unusual at this stage of the group).

Tell the children that in the first skit one leader will play a mother and the other leader will play her son. They are waiting for the father to pick up the boy for a weekend visit. (It could be a father-daughter pair depending on the prevalent custodial arrangements for children in the group.)

Ask the children to suggest the family name and the name of the child.

Scene 1: Waiting for the noncustodial parent

Mother: Well, he's supposed to be here any minute now.

Son: Yeah.

Mother: I think he might be late, but I told him 1:00.

Son: (hopefully) Yeah, but he'll be on time.

Mother: Did he tell you what you would be doing this weekend?

Son: Not exactly. Maybe we'll see a movie or go to a ballgame. (And so on.)

Keep the interchange relatively neutral in tone. The interaction is stopped more quickly than in most skits in order to permit the children to inject their concerns about visitation. Ask the children what they think the mother is feeling as well as what the boy is thinking and feeling. Children often express concerns about the father being late or even not showing up. If they do, incorporate these concerns into the skit. If not, use the skit primarily to address continued, post-divorce interparental hostility. This can be illustrated in the skit even if other themes, e.g., the boy's disappointment or anger about the father's lateness, are articulated.

Resume Scene 1

Mother: It's ten after one, where is he?

Son: Maybe he got into some traffic. He'll be here.

Mother: (trying to "comfort" her son) He never was very reliable. He's late for a lot of things, not only this.

Son: (hopefully) He'll be here, you'll see.

Mother: I wish you didn't get so disappointed when he's late. It's just like him to not think about other people's feelings. (And so on.)

Discussion Time

The primary aim here is to illustrate mother's "bad-mouthing" of the father. Ask what's happening. (Obviously if the group in its previous discussion focused on the boy's anger, sadness or disappointment, they too can be incorporated into the preceding dialogue.)

Children often talk about whether the father will be on time or arrive at all. Occasionally, fantasies about the father being in an automobile accident will emerge. And some children will express directly the idea of the boy feeling sad, let down by the father and/or angry at him. Most frequently, however, the group focuses on the mother putting down the father by saying negative things about him. When these ideas come up, ask the children how they feel when one parent bad-mouths the other. Children usually are quick to say that it makes them feel bad (angry, sad). They often share personal anecdotes. One child said, "Sometimes I'd like to stuff a sock in her mouth when she starts putting my dad down."

It is appropriate to empathize with the kids. Tell them you understand how sad and mad they must feel when one parent puts down the other parent. Letting the children know that these feelings are normal often leads to the spontaneous sharing of personal incidents.

Return to Scene 1

After discussing these issues, return to the skit and mother (or son) exclaim, "There he is, he's here!" Some leaders have a brief additional scene at this point in which one leader plays the mother and the other plays the father. A very short argument about father's being "late" (or mother misremembering the time) ensues.

Scene 2: The Visit

In Scene 2 a child is visiting with the father (or mother). Some leaders like the continuity afforded by using the same family; others prefer to treat these scenes as separate vignettes about visiting so that different child-parent pairings are possible, e.g., daughter-father, son-mother. Both can work well. The group leaders should determine the format. For convenience, we will continue to have the custodial parent be the mother. A group leader should play the noncustodial parent; select a child to play the youngster.

Father: Well, that was a really neat movie, don't you think?

Child: Yeah, I liked the part when Darth Vader was talking.

Father: Me too. I thought we'd go to the mall next and see if we can get you some new jeans and shirts and then out to McDonalds.

Child: Sounds good to me, I could sure use some new clothes.

Father: I don't know what your mother does with all the support money I pay her.

Child: (remains silent)

Father: Sometimes I think she just buys herself clothes and goes out and has a good time.

Discussion Time

Again the theme of a parent putting the other parent down is addressed. Tell the children this sounds like more put-down stuff. This often leads to more discussion of the sort noted previously.

Resume the scene. Often another child is selected to continue in the role of the youngster.

Return to Scene 2: The Visit

Child: (enthusiastically, as most children are enthusiastic about McDonald's). This is great. I'll get a hamburger and fries.

Father: Save some room for dessert. I thought we'd stop off at the Dairy Queen afterwards.

Child: (hardly believing father's generosity) Great! I'll get a large shake.

Father: We have to hurry though, I've got to be home by 6:30.

Child: How come?

Father: (a bit uncomfortably) Well, you remember Mary, don't you? I started sorta dating her a couple of months ago. Well, we're going out to a show tonight. I figured you'd be okay at the apartment.

Child: (deflated) Will you be out late?

Father: Not too late. Besides there's lots of good TV tonight.

Child: (somewhat bitterly) Sure, I'll bet. Nothing like a night watching TV. (And so on.)

Here the issue of parent dating is raised on the heels of father's too-good-to-be-true generosity. Ask the children what they think is happening and how the son (or daughter) feels about it. Children focus on the child's disappointment, anger at dad, anger at dad's girlfriend, sadness over being left for the girlfriend, and/or a cynical view of father's "generosity." Accept the comments of the group; empathize with and underscore the "*hurt feelings* kids have when their dad (mom) take visiting time to see their girlfriend (boyfriend)."

In some groups, discussion about *parental dating* may become considerably elaborated. Three common themes that have emerged are:

1. Competition for the parent's time and affection
2. Feelings of conflicted loyalty toward the parent's partner and the parent of the same sex as the partner
3. Sexual excitement and curiosity

Address feelings of competition by noting that "lots of kids have competitive feelings toward their mom's (or dad's) date" and that "kids can get angry at that man (woman) mostly because they're worried about sort of losing their mom (dad) to that man (woman)." Also, "kids sometimes think that if their mom (dad) starts loving someone, then she (he) will love the kids less." Point out that "love toward another grown-up is different from loving your kids. It's sort of like they are two 'love pies,' one for the grown-ups and one for the kids. If a parent gives a person they're dating a big piece of the grown-up love pie there is still the whole kids' love pie left." Comments of these sorts, used appropriately during a discussion, can alleviate some fears by providing a new cognitive understanding of the nature of a child's conflict with the new dating partner.

Address conflicted loyalty by saying that "kids sometimes aren't sure whether it's okay to like mom's new boyfriend (or dad's new girlfriend) and that a lot of kids sort of feel that they're not being loyal to their dad if they like mom's new boyfriend and sometimes kids worry that their dad will be hurt or angry if they do stuff with mom's new boyfriend." **Tell the children it is normal for children to like a person that one of their parents is dating, especially if he (she) is nice to them. Tell them that your dad will always be your dad and liking mom's boyfriend doesn't change that and vice versa.** Try to alleviate feelings of conflicted loyalty and guilt over developing positive feelings toward the new dating partner.

Finally, curiosity about the possible sexual side to the parent's dating behavior can be normalized by stating that "when kids get as grown up as you are, they sometimes have questions and ideas about sexy stuff when their mom (dad) is dating someone." This very frequently leads to giggles and excitement along with a surprising number of self-disclosures about witnessing some sexual behavior between the parent and dating partner. Tell the children that "it can be real exciting, but also quite upsetting to see or think about their mom (dad) doing some sexy kinds of things, but that when grown-ups date, it's really not unusual." This sharing among group members of such experiences lends support to these normalizing statements while the group leaders' neutral posture can result in children becoming more accepting of their parents' sexuality. As noted earlier, the issue of parental dating may be centrally salient in a particular group. If that is the case, the leaders may choose to emphasize dating issues by devoting a full session to it.

Scene 3: Returning to the custodial parent

Depending on what has surfaced up to this point, **group leaders may choose to emphasize competition between parents for the child's affection and loyalty or the custodial parent seeking information from the child about the other parent's private (usually dating) life or the child's sense of unhappiness over having to give up one parent in order to be with the other.** A leader should enact the role of the parent and a child the youngster.

Resume Scene 3

Mother: I'm glad you're home. How did the visit go?

Child: (somewhat subdued) Fine.

Mother: What kinds of things did you do?

Child: Well, we went to a movie, and had dinner at McDonald's, and we went shopping at the mall.

Mother: (somewhat suspicious) What did you get at the mall? What did you go shopping for?

Child: Dad got me some neat jeans, designer jeans, and I got a couple of new games for his home computer. They're neat!

Mother: (beginning to get angry) I'm not sure kids really need designer jeans. Games for the computer, huh. I wish I had money to throw around like that!

Child: (defensively) Well the games are educational too.

Mother: (sarcastically) I'll bet they are! What about What's-her-name, your dad's girlfriend, did she go with you?

Child: (looking upset) No.

Mother: Was she over for dinner? (And so on.)

Discussion Time

Stop the interaction with the usual discussion time. **Ask the children what they think is going on.** Children typically pick up on mother's competitive feelings around buying things for the child and her curiosity, perhaps even jealousy, regarding father's relationship with his new dating partner. Again, because these issues are initially broached in the safety of a displacement activity, children seem eager to share personal experiences and feelings about them. It is as if portraying the issue so clearly in the one- step-removed activity (rather than asking children directly to disclose family interactions and their feelings about them) gives children "permission" to discuss them without feeling on the spot. Sharing these experiences serves to normalize troublesome family conflicts and children's feelings about them. Group leaders can say:

> "It sounds like these sorts of things are pretty common when kids' parents have split up."
>
> "It's hard for kids to see their parents sort of competing with each other to get the kids on their side; it makes kids feel like they're caught in the middle."

Some children report that when mother asks them about visits with father, they hide things from her to avoid hurting her feelings. Purchases father may have made are minimized or not reported. Comments about the father's dating partner include telling mother that she (mother) is a better cook, is prettier, and/or has a better sense of humor. When such issues arise, leaders can say,

> "It sounds like some kids feel they sort of have to protect mom and that can be a big job."

Occasionally this will **lead** to **discussion about "the parenting child"** who in a multitude of ways protects, helps and takes care of mother and/or her responsibilities, e.g., cooking, doing laundry, caring for younger siblings, at times even looking after a depressed or overwhelmed mother. Emphasize the ways that children can be genuinely helpful at home. But do **caution that some kids,** even though they want to be helpful to mother, **sometimes resent having to do all those chores.** Often underlying anger at mother for enlisting the children in what can be developmentally premature roles must be denied, repressed, or simply kept to one's self. **Tell the children that they can be really helpful when times are tough in a family, but that doesn't mean that they love all the chores or only feel like saying thank you when their mom asks them to do things.** Kids sometimes get mad at their moms for having to do extra chores and sometimes they don't feel like doing those chores. That's okay. The child's *ambivalence* over being placed in the role of helper is thus articulated and accepted by group leaders. This acknowledgment can modify inappropriate behavioral expressions of the ambivalence that some children display, e.g., arguments with mother and fights with siblings, as well as alleviate feelings of guilt about having angry, resentful feelings toward mother for placing these demands on them.

The Group Letter to the Noncustodial Parent

A strikingly large number of children have very little (once a year or less) or absolutely no contact with their noncustodial parent (usually father). It is not unusual to have at least two such children in a group, though we have conducted groups in which all children do see their noncustodial parent at least as frequently as once a month. When a third or more of the children in a group rarely or never see their noncustodial parents, the group letter activity has been especially useful.

Introduce the group letter by noting that "lots of kids don't get a chance to see their dads very much after a divorce and that some kids never

see their dads at all." Briefly **review the amount of contact each child has with his/her noncustodial parent.** Leaders can then say,

> "It's our experience that when kids don't see their dad much, or don't see him at all, they have feelings and ideas about it. Even kids who haven't seen their dad for years and say they've forgotten about him usually still have some thoughts and feelings about that."

Even these brief, superficial comments can result in a flood of angry, sad and/or confused feelings about why father does not visit, call, or send birthday cards. After accepting these comments, leaders introduce the idea of a group letter to a father who does not visit. **Remind the group of the first session during which they constructed a story about a family in which the parents were having difficulties and were heading for a divorce.** The process involved in that group story (i.e., going around the circle with each child adding a sentence, the right to pass) is briefly outlined. As with the group story, one leader should **write down the children's contributions to the letter on a large sheet of paper or newsprint taped to the wall for everyone to see.** The leaders can pass or may contribute to the letter in the ways outlined in Session I regarding the group story.

Themes that commonly emerge in the course of this activity include:

1. Feelings of sadness
2. Missing the noncustodial parent
3. Anger at the noncustodial parent for not caring
4. Confusion over the reasons for his not visiting

Empathize with these painful feelings while underscoring how normal it is to have them even long after the divorce. Talk about how very hard it is on kids when their dads (moms) don't visit, call, or send cards, especially on birthdays and at Christmas time. Kids miss their dads (moms) and it hurts their feelings to be ignored.

If children introduce the idea of wishing accidents and illnesses will befall that parent, empathize and express that they feel so hurt and they want to hurt him (her) back. In addition to relief through catharsis, these comments can alleviate feelings of being different as well as of guilt for having such angry feelings toward a parent.

Next it is important to address the reasons for the parent not visiting.

> "A lot of kids get the idea in their heads that their dads don't visit because of them, like because they're not nice enough or smart enough or pretty enough or whatever to have dad want to visit."

After allowing for discussion of this, leaders say,

> "But you know that stuff just isn't true even though it may feel like it sometimes. Sometimes grown-ups have trouble being good parents after a divorce, not because of the kids but because of the grown-ups' own problems. Even grown-ups have problems and some of them can really be big hang-ups."

Leaders

For the great majority of children, this is the first time these issues will be addressed. **Try to alleviate feelings of self-blame and lack of self-worth associated with feeling responsible for the noncustodial parent's absence.** This can be particularly gratifying and has led to some of the most poignant moments in the life of the group. However, leaders should be prepared for children who will continue to deny having any such feelings. As one child put it, "The divorce was so long ago I don't even remember my dad. How can I miss him?" It is not helpful for group leaders to insist all children must have these feelings.

As noted at several points in this manual, including earlier in this chapter, visiting issues can be multifaceted and complex and they may be at the heart of significant post-divorce stresses for a sizable number of youngsters. Leaders should feel free to elaborate on the themes in this chapter and to extend them across two sessions, either deleting another set of themes, e.g., remarriage, or having more than eight sessions.

Alternative Session C: Remarriage and Stepparenting Issues

Mother Tells the Children of Her Plans to Remarry

Family Dinner with the Prospective Stepfather and His Children

The Role of the Stepparent

Materials

none

Rationale/Purposes

It is common, in the extended course of the divorce process, for children to face the issue of one or both parents remarrying. This event constitutes a major life-change for youngsters and thus carries with it not only new opportunities for enhanced social-emotional growth but also the potential for problems. In our work with children, both in our prevention groups as well as individually in clinical settings, we have become increasingly convinced of the importance of the major adaptations required of children when a parent remarries. This seems particularly true when it is the custodial parent (mother, for the vast majority of children) who marries, for this directly affects day-to-day life in the youngster's household.

Remarriage raises specific issues for children and serves as an example of the extensive life changes set in motion by parental divorce. As noted in previous chapters (see Part B, Session III in particular), thoughts, feelings and questions regarding remarriage will be particularly relevant to groups composed primarily of children living in remarried families. For such groups, the role-playing activities suggested here may be elaborated upon and more discussion permitted so that what we outline in the chapter could take place across two sessions rather than one. In such cases, the session dealing with custody is a good candidate to drop if one chooses to stay with an eight session format. If more than eight sessions are planned from the outset, then an additional session may be generated by extending coverage of remarriage issues to two sessions. Again, it is unwise to alter either the length or number of sessions once a group has begun.

When a parent, especially a custodial parent, remarries, a host of concerns, questions, and conflicted feelings commonly arise for children. The most prominent of these include:

- Competitive feelings toward the stepparent for the parent's time and affection
- Feelings of conflicted loyalty toward the stepparent and the parent of the same sex as the stepparent
- Resentment over efforts on a stepparent's part to discipline the youngster
- Confusion over the nature of the child's new relationships with step- and half-siblings.

Each of these potential difficulties can be a source of conflict for the child as well as for the newly constituted family.

Aims/Goals

1. To permit feelings such as competition with the stepparent, loyalty conflicts, and resentment towards stepparent discipline to emerge in the group.
2. To normalize these feelings by the group members sharing similar experiences and reactions and by group leaders articulating that these are widely experienced, common feelings.
3. To modulate the intensity of these feelings through increased cognitive understanding of the nature of the feelings and their sources by emphasizing the possibility for constructing a positive relationship with a stepparent, and by interpreting common barriers (e.g., guilt, reconciliation wishes) to establishing good relationships with stepparents.

4. To clarify the confusion about the nature of step- and half-sibling relationships by providing basic definitions of the terms themselves and through exploration of questions raised about a child's appropriate role in these relationships.

Activities

It is useful to have this session follow the one dealing with parent dating so that some of the concerns relevant to remarriage will already have been raised and discussed. The session can then begin with a review of the feelings and possible conflicts that emerged in the preceding session. These might include experiencing mother's new partner as a rival for her affection, divided loyalty between mother's new partner and father, and the role of the dating partner in disciplining the children. All of these are important themes in remarriage.

First, **remind the children that the last time one of the things we were talking about was how kids feel when a parent starts dating and what it's like for kids to visit the parent they don't live with.** We also started talking about the whole idea of parents dating. These comments usually elicit recollections of the Visiting Session and serve as a natural bridge to asking children to review their own current living situation.

Second, **ask the children to tell the group in turn about with whom they live.** Common arrangements include:

1. Living in a single parent household with no other adults present
2. Living with one parent and her (his) live-in partner
3. Living with a parent and stepparent in a remarried household

This usually leads to some discussion about the pros and cons of each living situation. **Underscore the fact that no situation is perfect and that each has its pluses and minuses.**

This opening discussion also gives group leaders a chance to clarify relationship terms by answering (or raising) questions such as

"How do you get a stepmom?"

"How many moms can you have?"

"What's the difference between a half-sister and a step-sister?"

While the majority of middle and late elementary school age youngsters can answer these questions, a surprisingly large number do not distinguish sharply between mother and stepmother and do not understand the difference between step- and half-siblings.

Third, then **tell children that we will be doing some skits about what it's like when a mom remarries.** The first of the two skits involves mother remarrying and has two scenes:

1. a mother telling her children about her plans to marry the man she has been dating
2. the family dinner in which a mother and her children and the prospective stepfather and his children interact. The second skit focuses on a stepparent disciplining a child.

Skit 1, Scene 1: At dinner mother announces plans to remarry

The female group leader should play the role of mother. Choose two or three of the group to play her children. The male group leader may join them as one of the siblings. Before the skit begins, **tell the children that this skit is about a mother who is planning to marry the man she's been dating and she is going to tell her kids about it.** The scene is set at dinnertime with mother announcing that she has prepared a special meal.

Mother: Well, I'm glad we could all be together for dinner tonight because there's something I want to talk to you about. You know John, the man I've been going out with, well, we've been really enjoying our dating each other.

Children: Yeah. Uh huh, sure. (Initially the group tends to be reserved in their responses.)

Mother: Well, you know I like him a lot and he likes me a lot, too. We've been spending more and more time together.

Children: (several children chime in) Yeah, you go out every weekend. He's over here a lot.

Mother: And it's been really great for me. Remember how lonely I was when your dad and I first split up? It's really nice to feel good again.

Children: Yeah, I remember. Yeah.

Mother: I've been thinking, now that John and I know how much we really care about each other, and you've gotten to know him too, that we could have a really happy family together if John and I got married.

Children: Uh huh. That would be nice. (Occasionally the children are reluctant to express any criticisms of John or any reservations about mother marrying him. If this happens the male group leader can present a dissenting view, but usually with some humor, e.g., "Marry John! But he's got such a funny laugh! He sounds like a donkey! And his nose! It's so big," and so on.)

Children: (More typically children respond with direct criticisms of John in ways such as this.) Marry John! He's fat. He can't even throw a football! He's got bad breath! (Several children in our groups made these comments.)

Mother: (a bit defensively) Well, I didn't say he was perfect. But I'm pretty sure I love him and he loves me. I think it'll work out well for all of us.

Children: You haven't known him long enough. He doesn't have a good job. He's a jerk. If you do that I'm going to tell dad. You should marry dad not that fat tub of lard. (These are examples of comments that have come up in the groups.)

Discussion Time

After the children have had a chance to sufficiently vent their criticisms of John and of mother's plan to marry him, call for a discussion time. **Ask what the children think is going on and how they feel. Ask later on what they think the mother is thinking and feeling.** Typically the group responds with comments to the effect that the children do not want their mother to marry John (or anyone else except father) and that they do not think much of John.

If some of the underlying concerns do not spontaneously surface here--and they often do--**ask why the kids are so dead-set against their mom getting married and how come the kids are so down on John.** These questions will usually elicit some of the themes that give rise to the resistance to mother marrying. Examples we have heard from children include:

> "But if she gets married, she won't spend hardly any time with the kids."
>
> "The kids don't want a stepdad, they already have a dad and they don't want to call anyone else dad."
>
> "They want her to marry their dad and if she marries John, then she can't get married to their dad."

Then **address the issues below:**

1. Competition with the stepfather for mother's time and affection
2. Loyalty conflicts between feelings for father versus those for stepfather
3. Remarriage as an interference with children's wishes for parents to reconcile.

The first of these, *competition* with the stepfather for mother's affection, can be handled effectively by emphasizing the concept of two different "love pies" (one representing a parent's love for other grown-ups such as dating partners or new spouse, and the other representing a parent's loving feelings for his or her children) as elaborated in the previous chapter.

The second, *loyalty conflicts*, also can be addressed as it was previously in the context of parent dating (see the preceding chapter). Here, too, the emphasis needs to be on articulating feelings kids have about being disloyal to their dad because they have some good feelings toward their stepfather. Add that

> "Sometimes kids aren't sure if it's okay to care about their stepdad *and* their dad at the same time. They get worried about hurting *their* dad's feelings or making him angry. But if a stepdad is a pretty good guy, and treats kids okay, it's normal to like him. And that's *not being disloyal* to dad, because your dad is still your dad no matter what."

Here the goal is to normalize affectionate feelings toward both the parent and the same-sex stepparent to alleviate feelings of guilt as well as to modify possible maladaptive behaviors directed toward a stepparent which are used to demonstrate one's loyalty toward the same-sex parent. After all, if a child angrily avoids a stepparent or provokes him (her), then feeling guilty about disloyalty to the same-sex parent is avoided.

Finally, the issue of *reconciliation wishes* often needs to be addressed fairly directly. These wishes appear to live on tenaciously even many years after divorce. When this is a central wish, a child may be antagonistic toward the stepparent (and the parent who has remarried) because the marriage represents the reality that the parents will not reconcile. As such this action flies in the face of the potentially powerful and cherished reconciliation wish. Leaders can say,

> "It's pretty common for kids to want their parents to get back together. Lots of kids have that wish. It's almost like they've forgotten how bad it was at home when the parents were married. They forget the fighting and name calling, and they forget how scared they (the kids) were and how crummy it felt to live in a house where the grown-ups didn't get along. But a lot of kids still wish their parents would get back together and everyone would live happily ever after, you know, the old 'divorce fairy tale' we talked about way back in our first meeting. Fairy tales can make us feel good, but only for a little while."

Scene 2: The Family Dinner

All the group members can be included in this scene to play the roles of the children. The group leaders lay out the premise of this scene by **telling the children that in this scene the mom and her kids and the guy she's going to marry and his kids all get together for a big dinner.** The female group leader plays the mother, the male group leader takes the role of the prospective stepfather, and the youngsters in the group choose (or are assigned) the roles of the children. **Ask the children in this skit to choose the names and ages.**

As the scene begins, it is common for the prospective stepfather's children to sit near him and mother's youngsters to line up next to her. The prospective stepfather and his children knock on the door (from the hallway) and enter mother's house. They greet each other affectionately and then each introduces his or her children to the other adult and to that adult's children.

Mother: It's nice to have everyone here for dinner. It'll sort of give us a good idea of what it will be like after the wedding.

Stepfather-to-be: Yeah. Except my kids are going to be living with their mom most of the time and they'll be with us every other weekend.

Mother: Right. And my kids will be going to their dad's once a month for a long weekend because he lives so far away.

(The children usually are playing their roles as this conversation unfolds. They ask each other how old they are, what grade they are in, whether they like to play Monopoly, whether they are on any team, what kinds of record albums they have, and so forth.)

Stepfather-to-be: I guess we'll have to work out sleeping arrangements for the weekends that all the kids are here.

Mother: Sure. That won't be too hard. Your boys can bunk in with my son and your daughters and my girls can share a room.

Children: (talking at once or one right after the other) Uh uh. No way. She's too little. I like my privacy. I'm not giving up my bed. He doesn't even like the same things I do. (Often the children protest this concrete example of "blending" the families and noisily raise multiple objections.)

Mother: Well, I'm sure we'll be able to work it out. After all, we'll be moving to a bigger house pretty soon.

Her children: (collectively) We have to move? You mean I can't be going to the same school? I don't want to move. (And so on.)

Discussion Time

This scene often results in a great deal of enthusiastic involvement of the group. Though the above illustration is by no means the only response a particular group may make, it is quite common for the interaction to be characterized by a pronounced boisterous and oppositional tone. The group leaders can point out that when two families get together it sure isn't always like the Brady Bunch. Leaders can empathize with how it can be hard on kids when a parent remarries; the family might move to a bigger place and the kids might have to share their room sometimes with a stepbrother or stepsister.

The group can now focus on the definitions of a step- versus a half-sibling. The leader can point out that,

> "One of the reasons all this can be hard is that most kids aren't sure how to act toward a stepbrother or stepsister. Are they like a friend or a brother?"

Discussion Time

This usually leads to a lively discussion in which role relationship confusions and questions can be clarified. In addition, the worry that a parent will side with his (her) children when there are arguments can also be articulated. Again, ultimately put emphasis on normalizing these feelings and concerns as well as on encouraging children to communicate them to their parents.

This scene is continued with the stepfather-to-be asking mother's children to call him "dad." Mother usually supports this. (We have been impressed by how frequently this issue appears to arise for children with a remarried parent.) Children nearly unanimously react to this with outrage and resistance.

Return to Scene 2

Stepfather-to-be: (addressing mother's children in an expansive, friendly tone) Well, since we'll all be living together in the same house, I think it'd be just fine if you called me dad. I think I'd like that.

Her children: (all chime in) No way! I have a dad, I'll never call you dad, you jerk.

His children: (usually more plaintively) But you're our dad, not theirs. They have a dad. I'm going to tell mom.

Mother: Well, we don't have to get that settled right now, do we? (And so on.)

Discussion Time

This scene is meant to elicit possible feelings of conflicted loyalty and nearly always does so--and with great heat. **Address the loyalty conflicts in the ways suggested earlier in this chapter and in the preceding chapter. Emphasize that it is both common and all right to have good feelings toward a father and stepfather.** Strongly suggest that "it is a whole lot better to give this new man a chance to be an okay guy, because stepdads can be nice and helpful to kids." This is meant to rein in the loyalty-based hostility toward stepparents and gives permission to children who do have a good relationship with a stepparent to share that with the group. Avoid the trap of focusing only on the upset, negative feelings children can have towards stepparents. **Try to set a more constructive direction after accepting and normalizing the negative feelings.**

Skit 2. The Stepparent as Disciplinarian

A concern that spontaneously emerged in many of our initial groups is the resentment children feel about the stepparent taking an active role in handing out both chores and punishments to his (her) stepchildren. The feelings expressed are intense, and youngsters sometimes portray their stepparents as characters out of Grimm's Fairy Tales, a witch or ogre who tortures stepchildren with unreasonable tasks and harsh punishment.

Develop this skit by having a group leader play a stepparent (stepfather or stepmother, depending on the life-circumstances of some or many of the children in the group) **while the other leader plays the biological parent married to that stepparent. Pick one of the children to play the child initially, but have other children assume this role as the skit continues.**

Introduce the skit by saying that "sometimes kids don't like it when a stepparent tells them to do something or gives out a punishment for not doing

something." Ask what kinds of chores a stepparent might give out and what kinds of rules might he or she enforce. Examples of commonly noted chores include taking out the garbage, setting the dinner table, and walking the dog. Household rules often mentioned are doing one's homework, brushing one's teeth, and going to bed at the correct time. An example of a chore is selected first.

Scene 1: Chores need to be done

Stepfather: (matter-of-factly) Jimmy (a made-up name), it's getting sort of late. The dog needs to be walked.

Child: In a little while. Right after this TV program is over.

Stepfather: Well, it's pretty late already, and I think the dog really has to go out. Look how he keeps going to the door.

Child: I'll do it soon. In just a few minutes.

Stepfather: (becoming irritated) I said to do it now. Look at him, he keeps going to the door. He needs to be walked now.

Child: (angrily) I don't have to do it now. You can't make me do it now.

Mother: Jimmy, John asked you nicely several times. I know that it's sometimes hard to do things your stepdad asks you to do, but the chores do need to get done.

Child: He's not my dad! He shouldn't be telling me what to do.

Mother: But he lives here, he is your stepdad, and he is a grown-up. Besides, he's not asking you to do something that doesn't make sense. The dog does need to be walked. You know that.

Discussion Time

Discuss the feelings of resentment that children may have toward the requests of the stepparent because they worry about being disloyal to the parent of the same sex as the stepparent. Leaders could say,

> "Jimmy seems sort of sensitive about his stepdad asking him to do a chore. It's almost as if he feels that if he does the chore, it will be like he's being disloyal to his dad."

This often leads to a discussion about the legitimacy of the stepfather's right to hand out either chores or punishments. **Tell the group that a lot of kids have these feelings. Return to the issue of legitimacy; handle loyalty conflict.** Point out that the stepfather is a grown-up and it is his house; besides that, he was asking pretty reasonable things. Occasionally, children will acknowledge the loyalty conflict, but go on to emphasize the anger toward the stepfather (for taking a lot of mother's time, for making it impossible for mother and father to reconcile, and so forth) as well as the child's resistance to the chore as an expression of that anger. **Empathize with these angry feelings** and then go on to **suggest more constructive ways of coping with angry feelings.** Emphasize the value of putting the feelings into words by talking to a parent, telling a friend about it, or even writing it down in a private journal. Also, **underscore the value of communicating the upset feelings to a parent--by talking or by writing a note.**

Scene 2: Being punished by a stepparent

The next part focuses on a stepfather giving out a punishment to a child. Choose another youngster from the group to play the role of the child. In this scene, the children in the group tend to express more intense feelings of anger and outrage than in the preceding scene having to do with chore-giving.

Stepfather: (calmly) Okay, your mother has told you four times to go to bed. It's already half an hour after your bed-time.

Child: So?

Stepfather: (only slightly annoyed) So I think that what you're doing is wrong. Well maybe going to bed a half an hour earlier tomorrow will help you to do what's right.

Child: I'm not going to bed earlier tomorrow.

Stepfather: (clearly annoyed) Oh yes you are.

Child: I am not and you can't make me. You're only my stepfather, anyway. You can't tell me what to do. (And so on.)

Discussion Time

Ask the group what's going on. The children usually have already been shouting their support to the one playing the child and offering him (her) advice (e.g., "Tell him to shut up," "Tell him you'll tell your dad," "Tell him you'll run away.")

Children tend to stress the outrage they feel when a stepparent presumes to take on a parental role. Acknowledge this as a feeling a lot of kids have. Go on to wonder out loud how come the kids get so mad about a stepparent acting in a parenting way. The lack of a legitimate right to that role often comes up along with expressions of loyalty conflicts and/or anger toward the stepparent for taking too much of mother's time and attention. Accept these feelings and note that many youngsters experience them.

Next, **tell the children that it is a good idea to try to get along with stepparents;** they are adults who will be living with them for a long time and a lot of stepparents can be helpful and nice when they are given the chance. **Ask what kids can do or what they can say in order to help things go better with a stepparent.** Children have offered suggestions such as,

> "Tell your mom to tell him (stepfather) to go slow for a while on giving out chores."
>
> "Tell your mom that she should give out the punishments."
>
> "Tell your dad to tell your mom that you don't like it when your stepdad punishes you."

Focus on what can be done to facilitate the development of a constructive relationship with a stepparent; this often defuses the intensely angry feelings children have by indicating that group leaders support the notion of a constructive relationship. This focus also helps to enlist children's thinking about how they might achieve a more positive relationship with a stepparent. In addition, it also gives children in the group who do have positive feelings about stepparents the permission to share this with the rest of the group. In this way, some children can become peer models for those who are having a hard time with stepparents.

Discussion

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, issues surrounding remarriage can be extremely complex. Feelings and questions stimulated by remarriage can become a major stressor for children in the aftermath of divorce. The activities and issues outlined in this chapter are most likely too numerous and complicated to address within one session. It will be up to the group leaders' assessment of the children in their group as to which of the scenes and issues to emphasize given the life-circumstances and concerns of the youngsters with whom they are working.

Session 7: The Group Newspaper

Materials

newsprint or other large sheets of paper

tape

magic marker

instamatic or Polaroid camera

film

tape recorder (optional)

notepad

Activities

The main activity of this session is a group effort to produce a divorce newspaper. This entails group members interviewing one another around divorce themes and discussing divorce-related topics. In addition, take a group photograph. (Prior to the session, arrange for a principal, secretary or teacher to take the photograph.) Use the last 10 minutes of this session to plan a group-ending party that will take place in the next session.

Between sessions 7 and 8, the co-leaders need to edit the newspaper based on what has emerged in this session (though leaders should feel free to include pertinent material overlooked in earlier sessions).

In the final session, give three copies of the newspaper to each youngster. It has been quite successful to put a xeroxed copy of the group photograph on the first page (see Appendix C for examples of group newspapers).

Introduction

1. **Remind the children that this is the next-to-last session.** This often elicits expressions of disappointment as well as requests to have more

sessions and/or to have this and the last session each be longer than usual. The leaders note that,

> "It can be hard to see a group like this come to an end. We've shared a lot together and gotten pretty comfortable with each other. It's sad to see it end."

2. After this has continued for a short while, **tell the children that the ending will have some good things about it, that everyone can take home a group newspaper after enjoying a group-ending party.** The youngsters usually respond enthusiastically to these new developments.

3. **Discuss the group newspaper about divorce in greater detail.** Explain that it will be a way of recording the ideas that the group came up with, a way of seeing what we've done together. Tell the children that each one will receive three copies of the newspaper, one to keep, and two to give to parents, stepparents or friends. Leaders can add,

> "Sometimes giving a parent or stepparent one of these newspapers can be real helpful. It's sort of a way of letting them know what kids think about divorce and what feelings and questions kids have."

Tell the youngsters that in this context the newspaper will not identify who said what, so that letting parents see it can be a comfortable way of "telling" parents and stepparents what the group was like without violating the confidentiality rule.

Inform the children that a group picture will be taken at the end of the session and that copies of it will be in the newspaper.

The Group Newspaper

Begin this activity by enlisting the children's participation in selecting a name for the paper, e.g., The Divorce Gazette. Then ask what goes into a newspaper and what are some of the different sections of a newspaper. Children can quickly come up with sports, movie reviews, editorials, news articles and advice columns. Younger children may need help from the leaders. **Next inquire about what kinds of topics might be in a newspaper about divorce.** Our groups have included good things about divorce, bad things about divorce, feelings about parents' dating, how children feel when parents fight, and so forth. The issues that emerge are written on a large sheet of newsprint taped to a wall so that everyone can see them. Group leaders should contribute important themes if the children have not raised them.

Once this list is written down on the newsprint, **ask the children how articles get written about what people think or feel about something.** Even later elementary school age children often have difficulty with this question, so leaders must help out. The news gathering activities to be mentioned include: interviewing people about their ideas and feelings, conducting surveys or polls about where people stand on issues, and having people write in questions to an advice column. Each of these will be described.

Interviews

It is usually best to **begin with interviews.** Initially one of the group leaders can take the role of the interviewer with a child as the interviewee. This permits the leader to model what sorts of questions can be asked. During the interviews, one group leader takes down some of the questions and answers (on his/her own notepad, not on the newsprint) with an eye toward gathering information to use in writing the newspaper. The children quickly become comfortable with this activity, and often ask if they can be the interviewer. If no one asks, however, the leaders can suggest that "Maybe one of you would like to take over and do some interviewing."

Children usually choose to interview the group leaders as well as each other. This provides an opportunity for the leaders to recall important themes from previous sessions. Some leaders have chosen to bring in a tape recorder both as a prop for interviewing and as an easy way to record the issues that arise so that they can refer back to them in actually writing the newspaper. An illustrative first interview is given below.

Leader: This is your roving reporter from the Divorce Gazette. I'm here at ______________ to interview some kids about divorce. Here's someone (calling on a child). What's your name?

Child: Mary.

Leader: Well, Mary, I'm from the Divorce Gazette and we've been trying to get kids' ideas about divorce. Is it "okay" to interview you?

Child: Sure.

Leader: First, are your parents divorced?

Child: Yes.

Leader: What do you think are the hardest things for kids about divorce?

Child: Well, probably the hardest thing is all the fighting. Your mom and dad fight a lot and yell at each other.

Leader: And how does that make kids feel?

Child: Crummy.

Leader: Crummy in what ways?

Child: Oh, mad, and like, you know, you just wish they'd not fight.

Leader: Are there other things that kids have a hard time with when their parents split up?

Child: Yeah, well, you know, you can't see your mom and dad together. And a lot of kids even think they caused the divorce.

Leader: And that makes kids feel sort of guilty, like they should've done something different so the divorce wouldn't have happened?

Child: Yeah.

Leader: But kids don't cause divorce, do they? I guess we'd better put that in the newspaper so kids will know they don't have to feel bad about that.

Note the use of the generalized form for asking questions (i.e., asking about "kids"). Often children will respond by disclosing directly their own feelings and thoughts about their parents' divorce. This is okay, but it is best to keep the questions general.

After this interview the leader can say, "Now I'm going to interview someone about some of the good things about parents splitting up." Then interview another youngster. When the second interview is concluded, offer the role of reporter to a child (if the children have not already asked). The interviewing then proceeds with those children who wish to interview taking turns as the interviewer.

Surveys

After four or five interviews have been conducted, **introduce the idea of taking a poll or survey to find out what people think about particular issues.** This is a less demanding task than interviewing in that a leader conducts all the questioning, the questions are succinct, and the children need not elaborate on answers.

When newspapers want to get an idea about how people feel about something they take a poll. A newspaper reporter might ask about people's favorite movie star or favorite food. We're going to have a poll about ideas kids have about divorce. For example, the leader can then ask,

"What is the worst thing for kids when parents get a divorce?"

"What is the best thing for kids about divorce?"

"What is the biggest worry kids have when their parents divorce?"

"What kinds of feelings do kids have when their parents get divorced?"

Address these questions to the group as a whole. Sometimes, going around the circle (as in the group story telling activity in Session 1 and letting each child respond individually or pass) can be effective, especially if children are not volunteering. However, children usually do volunteer.

A variation of this activity is to pose one of the suggested questions to the group and to ask the group to talk together for a minute or two and come up with one group answer to the question. This often works well with older children.

Advice Column

A major part of creating the newspaper is producing an advice column. Using a "Dear Abby" format, group members select a name for the advice-giver and generate problems in the form of brief letters. **Ask the children what kinds of letters a kid in a divorce situation might write to an advice column.** Each question offered by a child should be put into the form of a brief letter and written on the newsprint taped to the wall. After that, ask the group what kinds of advice they would give. What would be some things they could suggest. This permits the group to draw on discussions of coping strategies in previous sessions. Thus, not only are concerns about feelings, events, and difficult family interactions reviewed, but the ways to actively cope with these problems can be highlighted. Appendix C includes examples of advice column questions and answers.

Planning the Party

With about 10 minutes remaining in the session, the leaders can say,

> "I think we have enough material now to write a newspaper. We (the leaders) will put it together before the last session next week. And we'll have three copies of the paper for everyone. But now it's time to plan the party for next time."

This is greeted enthusiastically. **Tell the children that the leaders will bring in pizza or some other food that the group would like. Ask children about their preferences.** The debate usually is between those favoring pizza and others who would like McDonald's hamburgers. Pizza has won out in every one of our groups. Drink preferences typically are for a cola or a fruit-flavored pop: tell the children that the leaders will bring some of each.

In most groups, children spontaneously and enthusiastically offer to bring something in, too. This seems to be a reflection of the sense of group cohesion that has been achieved. Typical suggestions are cookies, cake, and candy, but also have included napkins, paper plates, salads, nacho chips, and so forth. Accept this, but add that,

> "It's real nice that some of you want to bring something in, and if you can that's fine. But we know that sometimes it's hard for kids to get the money to buy all that, so if you can't get it, it's okay."

This serves to remove pressure to purchase these items, which may not be possible for some children.

Photograph

Finally, at the very end of the session, **remind the group that it's about time for the group picture.** Ask one of the children to get Mr. (Ms.) ________________. Then pose for the group picture. Be sure several are taken to ensure a good, reproducible photograph. **Remind the children that the leaders will bring three copies of the newspaper** (with a xerox copy of the group picture on the cover) **for each one next week.**

Writing the Newspaper

Between this session and the next, the leaders need to write the divorce newspaper, have the group picture copied onto the title page of the newspaper and make three copies of the final paper for each youngster. Typically the leaders meet once or twice and construct a two- to three-page, typed paper. The newspaper consists of "stories" (e.g., The Hardest Things About Divorce for Kids, Who is to Blame, What Every Stepparent Should Know) based on the interviews and polls, an advice column based on what emerged in this session (and often one or two key themes not covered in the session), and occasionally special features such as "movie reviews" about imaginary films concerning divorce. Leaders should feel comfortable in taking some literary license in constructing the newspapers so that the final product can be compelling and interesting to children, parents, and stepparents.

Session 8: The Final Group Meeting

Materials

pizza

soft drinks

paper cups

napkins

paper plates

copies of the newspaper (3 per child)

Rationale/Purposes

As the group draws to an end, **help children come to grips with their sense of loss.** Not only do the youngsters lose a place to air divorce-related concerns and questions, but they also lose two adults whom many have come to like and respect. Because issues of loss (i.e., of the family unit, of the noncustodial parent) are so salient for many children of divorce, this session requires special sensitivity on the part of the group leaders. Saying "good-bye" in a constructive way is the central, organizing theme.

Aims/Goals

1. To summarize substantive issues covered in the course of the group sessions.
2. To encourage constructive parent-child communication about these issues.
3. To help children cope adaptively with their feelings about having the group end and saying "good-bye" to the leaders.
4. To discuss the post-group parent meeting and allay concerns about confidentiality.

Activities

The three major activities in this session are to **distribute and talk about the divorce newspaper, discuss the post-group meeting between the group leaders and parents, and have the group party.** Usually, these unfold in the order just given. Though it is somewhat difficult for children to delay the gratification of the party, we have found that once the party begins it is nearly impossible to turn the group's attention to other matters.

Reading the Newspaper

Begin the session with one of the co-leaders saying,

> "Well, today's a big day. It's our last time together. We've got the pizza and the drinks for our party, but first let's hand out the newspapers, look them over and read them."

After each child is given three copies of the newspaper, the leaders can add,

> "Let's take a couple of minutes to look these over and then we can take turns reading out loud."

Usually, the group is excited about the newspaper: they giggle and comment on the group picture which is xeroxed on the first sheet of each copy; they joke with one another about some of its contents; and they are pleased and excited about seeing what they said the previous session appear in the stories and advice column.

After a few minutes, suggest that the reading begin. With the group seated in a circle, it is easy for members to take turns reading several lines apiece. As always, if someone wishes to pass, he/she can. As sections of the paper are read, the group leaders can **underscore issues, feelings and coping strategies.** For example, if a section has been read about how children feel when parents fight and put each other down (and this theme almost always appears in the newspaper), the leaders can say,

> "Yeah, we spent a lot of time talking about that. It's real hard for kids to hear parents argue and say bad things about each other. Kids get upset about that and can have sad or even angry feelings about it. Remember what kids can do about it?

Children may then offer recollections about removing themselves from the scene of a fight, having friends over, and telling parents that fighting and bad-mouthing the other parent makes them feel upset. Leaders can help recall these coping strategies by saying,

> "Yeah, remember we agreed that parents' fighting and divorce were grown-up business and that it doesn't help for kids to get involved."
>
> "Remember we said that it's important to let parents know how you feel about their arguing or saying bad stuff about each other. And you can do that by telling them, or writing them notes, or even showing them this newspaper."

Try to normalize the feelings and emphasize the coping activities associated with each theme discussed. Another example might be that of visiting the noncustodial parent and the accompanying feelings of sadness about not being able to be with both parents at once, loyalty conflicts, and anger over the parent spending time with a date. After leaders help the youngsters recall previous discussions about these issues, they can say,

> "Remember how we said that when kids go back and forth between parents that they feel sad about not being with both at the same time."
>
> "Like in our skit when the kid felt the parents were trying to compete with each other to make him (her) like them the best. Boy that really made the kid wonder 'Who should I be loyal to? Whose side should I be on?' But remember how we said that kids usually care about both parents and feeling like they have to take sides makes them feel real bad."

Leaders can go on to recall for children the importance of letting parents know how upset that makes them either by telling them, writing a note, or even drawing a picture (especially for younger children). Here, leaders can suggest showing the parents a copy of the newspaper or leaving one out on the kitchen table for the parent to see.

Throughout the reading of the newspaper, the leaders may **elaborate the themes by recalling previous discussion and skits about them and in the course of this emphasize the normality of these feelings and questions. Underscore the importance of the relevant coping strategies. Suggest that the children show the newspaper to parents** (or leave it out where they are bound to read it) **as a new method for communicating with parents.**

Discussing the post-group parent meeting

When the newspaper has been read in its entirety, the leaders say,

> "There is one more thing we should talk about before getting to the pizza. You know that we (the leaders) are going to be meeting with your parents next week. We'll be telling them what the group was like and what kinds of things bother children whose parents get divorced. We think that parents can be more helpful to their kids, if they know from experts like us what kinds of questions, feelings and worries a lot of kids have. That way when you talk to them, or write them notes, or show them the newspaper, they'll know that these kinds of things are pretty common, that it's normal for kids to have these feelings and ideas. That way, they can be more ready to listen to you and help you."

Sometimes this will elicit questions about what the leaders will say to their parents and whether the leaders will tell their parents what each child said individually. But in some groups this topic is greeted with silence and uncomfortable looks. If the children do ask what the leaders are going to say to parents, the leaders can ask the group,

> "What do you think parents and stepparents ought to know about what kids think and how they feel when their parents get a divorce?"

Accept their ideas, and add important themes which may not have been raised by the youngsters. For example, leaders can say,

> "Well, how about if we tell them that kids don't like it when their parents argue or put each other down. And we can say that visiting can sometimes be hard because even though parents have stopped loving each other the kids still care about both parents. And that kids sometimes don't like it when parents date or get remarried because they're worried about their parents' loving them less and having less time for them, and stuff like that?"

Regarding the issue of confidentiality, it is important for the leaders to reassure children that,

> "When we tell your parents about the kinds of things kids think and feel when parents get a divorce, we are not going to tell them what each of you said. Like when we tell them that kids don't like it when parents put each other down, maybe one of your parents will ask 'Did my son say that?' or 'Is my daughter feeling bad about that?' and what we're going to say is 'That's what a lot of kids feel, but we can't tell you what your child said because we promised the kids that what they said in the group was going to be private.'"

This sort of discussion is very useful and serves to reduce children's anxiety about a possible breech of confidentiality. Additionally, it also lets children know that the leaders, as divorce experts, are going to inform parents about and sensitize them to the feelings, questions and worries that the children have been wrestling with. It is comforting to many youngsters to know that their parents will hear from adults about how they feel. It also encourages some children to communicate with their parents about divorce issues once the groundwork has been laid in this way.

The Party

Usually, the party begins with about 25 minutes remaining in the session. Schools will usually keep pizzas hot in a cafeteria oven or a helper (e.g., research assistant, school counselor) can be asked to get them for the group about 20 to 25 minutes into the session. **Ask the children to distribute paper plates, napkins and paper cups; then share the pizza, soft drinks and food that the children may have brought.** The atmosphere of the group typically becomes very relaxed at this time, and most often it is up-beat in tone. The group members joke together and comment on the food. It is interesting and gratifying to see the group cohesion expressed concretely in children pouring drinks for one another, offering food to each other, and passing napkins, plates and cups. **Participate in the spirit of**

bon amie, but also comment from time to time (in a relaxed, informal manner) that,

> "It's kind of hard to see the group come to an end."
>
> "After all the things we've shared together, it's sort of sad to have to say 'goodbye.'"
>
> "We've done a lot of groups with kids whose parents are divorced and sometimes when the group ends, the kids have upset feelings about it."

The purpose here is to articulate and (if the children seem able to) discuss underlying feelings of sadness and of missing the group. Not to comment on this would be colluding with the group's defenses against becoming aware of these uncomfortable feelings. For a group of older children who have shown that they are particularly psychologically- minded, it can be quite helpful to connect feelings of loss about the group to feelings of loss experienced in the context of divorce.

> "You know these feelings we've been talking about, how kids sometimes feel sad about seeing the group end and not being able to get together with the leaders, well, those feelings are sort of like the ones kids have when their family breaks up and they miss having their family all together."
>
> "Sometimes kids even get sort of angry when the group ends, like they feel the group leaders shouldn't leave and that's a lot like how kids feel when their parents get a divorce."

For a group of especially mature, psychologically-minded youngsters, comments of this sort can lead to remarkably insightful, useful discussion. But even for these children, it is important to keep the comments in a general form, e.g., how "kids" feel, rather than interpreting directly how a particular child or even how this particular group feels.

As the end of the session approaches, the leaders will also want to share their own feelings of missing the group. Rather than talking about how "we" (the group) might feel or how "kids" might feel, as was done earlier during the period, the leaders should specifically tell the children that

> "We have enjoyed meeting with you and working together on these complicated feelings and questions about divorce, and we're going to miss you. We've gotten a lot done together and even group leaders have some sad feelings about saying 'good-bye.' But we're glad we had a chance to have these meetings with you because we think that what we've done together can help make things go even better for you from now on."

At that point, the leaders note that the session is about over and they say "good-bye" to the children. Usually, about a five minute clean-up period follows which permits leaders and children to say "good-bye" individually to one another.

PART C

MANAGEMENT ISSUES DURING CHILDREN'S SESSIONS

Introduction

Management issues can surface in any of the sessions described in the previous chapter. This section discusses how group leaders can address and cope with disruptions in the group process.

A number of different threats can challenge the smooth and effective group process. They include:

a. Violating the "no put-downs" rule

b. Violating the "taking turns talking/listening" rule

c. Engaging in distracting interactions

d. Dominating the discussion

e. Giving idiosyncratic responses

Each of these threats (which can detract from the effective functioning of the group) presents group leaders with the task of managing specific behaviors.

General Guidelines for Managing Threats to Group Process

The same general guidelines are appropriate for group leaders to use for each type of threat to the group process. The steps presented below represent a sequence of increasingly firm management strategies. Within the discussions of each strategy, brief examples for addressing each type of threat (a-e) to effective group process are given.

1. The first step involves gentle confrontation in the group at the time the difficulty surfaces. The group leader can say,

-- "That sounds like a put-down. Remember our rule -- no put-downs."

-- "Remember our group's rule about taking turns -- everyone can get a chance to talk and listen if we don't interrupt each other."

-- To two boys who are poking one another, "Hey guys, it's real hard for the group to talk and listen to each other while you're poking at each other."

-- To a child who has been dominating group discussion/activity, "Let's give the other kids in the group a turn. Who else has an idea about this?"

-- To a child who is elaborating how his father got so angry he cut up all the children's clothes, "Well, we know that parents can get very angry and upset, but most dads can stop from scaring their kids so much by doing stuff like this."

The aim of this strategy is to catch the first instances of any threats to the group process when they occur. It is not helpful to ignore such issues and hope they will not recur. This strategy is usually repeated a few times before moving to the second step.

2. If difficulties with the first three kinds of threats (a-c) to smooth and effective group process continue within or across sessions, the second step is to confront them again directly in the group at the time they occur and suggest that a time-out may be necessary.

A time-out is defined as a brief period in which a youngster is physically separated from the group by going to a far corner of the room.

Difficulties with the last two kinds of threats (d-e) are still handled using the first strategy for several more occurrences.

When the difficulties continue, the group leader can say,

-- "That sounds like a put-down again. We've talked about our no put-down rule before. If put-downs keep happening we're going to have to give a kid time-out. That means going off to that corner over there until you feel you can come back to the group without put-downs."

-- "Remember our rule about everyone getting a chance to talk in the group without being interrupted. We've talked about that rule before. If a kid keeps interrupting, we're going to have to give him a time-out" (etc.).

-- "Hey, guys, that poking stuff makes it hard for everyone else to talk and to listen in here. If you keep it up, we're going to have to give you a time-out" (etc.).

3. For all five threats (a-e) to effective group process, the third step is for one of the group leaders to talk briefly and privately with a youngster immediately after the session in which the problem occurs.

The group leader can say,

-- "Bobby, we've asked you to stop the put-downs. It's really hard for kids to be comfortable if they're worried about getting put down. It would be a big help to the group if you quit the put-downs. OK?"

-- "Mary, we've talked about letting other kids have a chance to talk. You've been interrupting and that makes it hard for everyone in the group to get a turn. It would be a big help to the group if you could wait your turn to talk and not interrupt. OK?"

-- To Bobby and Billy together, "Guys, we've asked you to quit whispering to each other and poking each other. It makes it hard to keep our minds on what's happening in the group. It'd be a big help to the group if you guys would quit doing that stuff and be a part of what's happening in the group. OK?"

-- Jenny, I know you have lots of good ideas. It's been good for the group to hear what's on your mind. But it's real important for everyone in the group to get their chance to talk, too. So sometimes I'm not going to call on you even if your hand is up first. Just so we can give everyone a chance to share their ideas. OK?"

-- "John, it sounds like you've got some special things that bother you -- like your dad cutting up your mom's clothes and the time your mom kept hitting your little sister with a stick. That's stuff that would upset any guy a lot. But we really can't keep talking about those things over and over again in a group.

Those are things that maybe you need to talk to a grown-up about by yourself, a grown-up who can help kids with those special kinds of problems. Is it 'okay' if I talk to your mom about your seeing a grown-up alone to talk about those things? I won't tell her what you said in the group, only that I think it'd be a good idea for you to have your own grown-up to talk with." (If the child agrees, as is usually the case, a referral for therapy can then be made. The child can stay in the group, but if idiosyncratic issues arise again, the youngster is reminded privately of the fact that those things are best talked over outside the group.)

4. For the first three difficulties (a-c), the fourth step is to implement the "time-out." This means sending a youngster to a far corner of the room for a few minutes (usually 3-5 minutes). For the first three difficulties (a-c), the child is confronted with what he/she is doing, reminded of the fact that the particular issue has been discussed before and then told "it looks like it would be a good idea to have a time-out and when you're ready to come back to the group you can." This might need to be repeated several times for a particular child. Since the last two difficulties (d-e) are usually less under the conscious control of the youngster, group leaders should deal with them by using strategy number 3, i.e. talking briefly and privately with the youngster immediately after a session in which the problem occurs.

5. For all five difficulties (a-e), the next step is to tell the child privately at the beginning of a session that if the behavior in question cannot be controlled in the group he or she will be asked to return to his/her classroom for that group session and can return the following week.

Occasionally, it is necessary to exclude a youngster from the group permanently. Steps 1-5 usually occur in rapid succession so if these management strategies will not be effective, it becomes clear by session two or three. The cost to effective group process needs to be assessed and if it will be too disruptive to continue having a particular child present, he or she should be removed from the group. When this occurs, a clear exploration of the difficulties, often accompanied by a referral for individual treatment, is made to the school mental health professional and/or directly to the parent.

Group Level Disruptions to Group Process

Often, there are times that the entire group, or most members of the group, are mutually engaged in disruptive behaviors. This may take the form of several or all children poking at one another, giggling uncontrollably, being "silly" (e.g., falling out of their chairs, throwing someone's pencil or scarf around the room), and so forth.

It is our experience that when these group level disturbances occur, it is usually because the children are feeling anxious and/or excited by the nature of the material which has recently been unfolding in the group session. For example, we have seen this phenomenon when a particularly raw group story with much aggression is told or when the parent fight scene has been especially vivid.

The group leaders should try to examine and understand the stimulus for the group level disruption. It then becomes possible to tone down the intensity of the stimulus (e.g., reduce the level of aggression as the parent fight continues) and to comment on the disturbing issue.

A group leader might say, "Sometimes when parents fight, it really feels scary to kids. In fact, it can get so scary that kids start having to do stuff like fight with each other and poke each other. I think that's why everyone is poking at each other now. It's sort of like the fighting feelings get kinda contagious and the kids catch them from the parents and have to fight themselves." Or, "Sometimes kids get real scared and sad when parents fight. Sometimes, when that happens, kids try to make the scared and sad feelings go away with a lot of giggling and laughing. Maybe that's why everyone is giggling and laughing a lot now, to sort of chase away sad and scared feelings." A comment or two of these types coupled with the group leaders' reducing the intensity of the triggering stimulus usually serves to get the group settled down. It is actually productive in that it shows children how they are handling troublesome feelings.

Though the combination of reducing the intensity of the triggering stimulus and group level interpretations of the disruption are helpful, it is sometimes necessary to add a firm directive to "settle down." Group leaders may have to say, "OK, that's enough now. Let's all settle down. Now!" The interpretation then may be repeated and the children can hear it better.

The Special Child

Every so often, a child with special and pronounced problems will be in a group. We have observed children who seem severely depressed and are very quiet, withdrawn, and sad-looking. They may cry easily and frequently as well. We have also seen children whose thoughts appear strange and disordered. They are prone to making disturbing comments repetitively that are tangential to group discussion.

An example of this is a child who constantly brought up bathroom activities and sounds. Sometimes, a child will raise highly disturbing, atypical issues. While some of this was discussed under the last threat (e.g. giving idiosyncratic responses), sometimes the issues are especially distressing to the group. An example of this is a child who brought up the brutal and sadistic killing of his dog by his father. On occasion, we have also seen children who give indications that they have been physically abused. A child may relate, several times, stories of being physically abused and may show physical evidence of it in the form of bruises, burns, or cuts.

In conducting literally hundreds of groups, we can conclude that it works best to take quick and decisive actions when we believe we have a special child in a group. Rather than go through the general strategies for managing interferences to group process we usually opt for a different approach.

When the group leaders think a particular youngster may have special problems, the first step is to take the child aside, privately, after a group session and say, "It seems that things aren't going very well for you. Like maybe you've been having troubles with sad (upsetting, scared, hurt) feelings. When a boy/girl is having those kinds of feelings (or things happening) it's a good idea for them to talk about them privately with a grown-up who can help kids. I'd like to tell your mom (dad) that it would be a good idea for you to have a grown-up all to yourself to talk to about those upsetting feelings and things. But I wanted to tell you first. OK?"

The group leaders then inform the parent directly of the need for a psychological evaluation or may tell the school mental health worker and have that person contact the parents. Of course, if child abuse is suspected, it is incumbent on the school to inform Protective Services as well.

Conclusion

The first three threats (a-c) to effective group process are common to these groups. Children sometimes unwittingly are testing the group leaders' assertion that the group will be a comfortable and safe place to explore and discuss divorce-related issues. It is important for the group leaders to enforce group rules in a firm and clear way. These are not open-ended child therapy groups; interferences to group process cannot be "worked through" or permitted to run their course psychologically. There is little time in which many divorce-specific issues need to be confronted and discussed. Distractions from this task threaten the usefulness of the group for all.

The last two threats (d-e) to the group process are less common than the first three (a-c). Usually, they are related to a child's style or problems rather than a need to test rules or search for limits. As such, they are handled a little differently with an emphasis on brief, private talks with a group leader rather than public confrontation or the use of time-outs.

The special child can seriously skew the focus and process of the entire group. Such children are usually significantly troubled and are wrestling with issues for which the group can be only minimally helpful. Though it may feel to a group leader that he or she is being "unfeeling" or "unkind" or "rejecting" by moving rapidly to exclude such children from the group, it is helpful to keep in mind that the group leader is also recommending and urging the kind of special help these children need. The group leader is also simultaneously preserving the useful function of the group for the rest of the group members.

PART D

THE PARENTS' SESSIONS

Introduction

Participation of Parents

We have had notable difficulty in getting parents to attend the pre- and post-group meetings. These are parents who have already given written permission for their child to be in an eight session group, yet many do not show up at either the pre- or post-group meeting, let alone both.

We do not fully understand this phenomenon since even parents who do not attend often report (on our questionnaires or spontaneously and directly to teachers and principals) that the group seemed quite helpful in specific ways to their children. These same parents will inquire as to whether a younger or older sibling of the child who participated in the group could be in a similar group the following semester or year.

Our best sense of poor attendance, which is more pronounced for low socioeconomic status parents, is that the realistic rigors of single-parent life coupled with residual feelings of guilt over having their children endure stress related to their divorce makes coming to these meetings especially difficult for some parents.

For those parents who do attend, the pre- and post-group meetings between parents and group leaders nearly always go smoothly, and often have the flavor of focused, group parent guidance.

I. The Pre-Group Meeting with Parents and Leaders

Materials

coffee or tea (include decaffeinated)

donuts, cookies, or fruit

napkins

cups

Telephoning the Parents

This meeting provides group leaders and parents with an opportunity to interact before sessions with the children begin. Another parent-leader meeting should be held after the final session. The rationales and focuses for discussion at these two meetings are quite different.

Before describing the content of the parent-leader meeting, here are the logistics of setting them up after you have arranged for a meeting room:

1. About 10 to 14 days before the meeting is to be held, the leaders should divide the group list and telephone the custodial parent of each child. Since most parents work, an early evening time seems most feasible. The leaders should tell parents that the meeting will be in the evening (usually 7 or 7:30 p.m.) and ask which day(s) would be most convenient. A consensus usually emerges for possible times.
2. Call the parents again to confirm the date, day, time, and place of the meeting. In general, encourage parents to attend and emphasize the potential usefulness of the meetings.

Be sure to let the principal, counselor, or social worker know he or she is welcome to attend. This can facilitate school-program ties.

- Rationale/Purposes

When a group begins, parents do not know the group leaders, and group leaders are not aware of specific concerns parents may have about their youngsters. It seems, therefore, worthwhile for parents and leaders to have the chance to meet before an intervention group begins. This gives parents and leaders an opportunity to become acquainted so that they are not simply faceless names or disembodied voices over the telephone to one another.

At the first meeting, the leaders introduce themselves, inform the parents that the group their child is in will be starting soon, briefly refresh the parents' memory about the nature of the groups, and emphasize the value of parents and group leaders getting together before the group begins as well as after it ends.

Aims/Goals/Activities

1. Facilitate self-introductions of leaders and parents. Ask each person to give name, number of children, and more background, if appropriate.
2. Describe to the parents the overall rationale for the groups and the general nature of the intervention.
3. Give parents a chance to raise questions about the groups and/or bring to the group leaders' attention special concerns they may have about their youngsters.
4. Answer questions in general.

For more details, see subsequent sections. The session usually lasts an hour to an hour and a half.

The Meeting

Group Discussion

The **leaders introduce themselves,** tell parents who they are (e.g., give their institutional affiliation, state their professional credentials), and ask **parents** to **introduce themselves** to the group by saying who they are and giving their child's name.

Ask parents to share some background about their family such as how long they have been separated/divorced, whether they or their ex-spouse have remarried, and how they see things going for their youngsters. Often parents will communicate their assessment of their child's adjustment to the divorce.

Parent responses

> My son is getting along very well; he doesn't seem to be affected at all by the divorce.
>
> He's had a lot of problems since the divorce.
>
> She keeps everything bottled up inside; I can't get her to talk about the divorce.

Leaders accept the comments and note:

> Some kids do really well after the initial upset wears off, but a lot of kids have some questions and concerns about the divorce.

Leader response (if appropriate):

> This is not a group for troubled children, but instead it is a way of trying to prevent trouble for children.

This leads naturally into a brief (ten to fifteen minute) presentation by the leaders of the reasons for the intervention and what the group sessions will be like:

1. About a third of all children in the United States see their parents divorce before age 18.
2. Even though it may alleviate a substantial and corrosive level of stress due to friction between parents, divorce is a stressful event for youngsters.

3. Even though divorce is initially stressful for nearly all kids, some handle it with very little upset or problems while others have lots of questions, feelings, and worries about the whole divorce process.

4. Emphasize that children can help each other by being together in a group and sharing ideas and feelings about divorce.

Leaders: Tell parents about children's concerns:

Common questions and feelings that children have include:

Did I cause the divorce?

Do my parents still love me?

What can I do when my parents argue?

How does custody get decided?

Will custody change?

Group leaders find that children may be angry or sad, and they may be suffering from loyalty conflicts about which parent to side with. It is usually helpful for children to be able to ask questions and to put troubling feelings into words. Just "corraling" the questions and feelings with words can help. Point out the usefulness of children sharing feelings and ideas as a way of seeing that they are not unusual for having them. Finally, emphasize the value of increasing communication among children and between children and parents as a way to try to head off the development of any problems.

Parent concerns

At this point, parents frequently share concerns about their youngsters:

1. lack of communication between parent and child
2. angry and/or non-compliant child behavior
3. problems in disciplining children
4. a lack of contact between the child and noncustodial parent
5. children's reactions to a parent's live-in partner or new spouse

Parents often ask one another what their experiences have been with respect to these issues; a lively discussion, primarily among parents, can then follow.

Leaders: Underscore to parents common themes:

"Since youngsters talk so little to parents, friends, or others about their concerns, many kids feel kind of upset because they think they're the only ones having those ideas and feelings. That's why the group discussions for children which we planned can be so helpful; the kids can see just how normal and common it is to have these thoughts and feelings."

Parent concerns:

Parents may begin to ask very specific questions about how to handle a particular child behavior or what to do about a conflict they are having with an ex-spouse. It is best for leaders to admit candidly that,

> "We really don't know you folks very well and we haven't even met your kids yet. Divorce can be a very complicated business and people usually have a lot of strong feelings, too. It really is impossible for us to give advice to you right now. But maybe others here have had some of the same sorts of experiences, and might have some suggestions for how to handle them."

Often parents will then discuss whatever issues have been raised initially in the form of questions directed to the leaders. Leaders can conclude this discussion by saying,

> "We're glad you had a chance to share some ideas about these sessions. When we meet again after the children's group sessions are over--and we've had the chance to get to know your kids--we can share with you what kinds of questions and feelings are on their minds."

Confidentiality and the Use of Displacement Activities

This provides a natural bridge to a presentation by the leaders about the intervention, itself. Tell parents that,

> "Even though we will share with you the things that come up in the groups, we really can't tell you exactly what issues your child brought up. We have to promise the kids that who said what in the group will be

confidential, or they just won't say much. But we will tell you what kinds of questions and feelings did come up in the group, and that will give each of you an idea of what your child may be wrestling with. You should also know that we will not be asking children a lot of personal questions about their families. The way we work the group sessions is to talk about imaginary families and kids and what questions and feelings these imaginary kids have.

"For example, in the first session the group makes up a story about a family where the mom and dad are arguing and are going to get divorced. Each boy and girl adds a sentence to the story. That way the kids can begin to show their ideas and feelings about divorce without feeling like they have to tell private things about their family. In other group sessions we put on skits, like about parents' arguing, kids going to visit the parent they don't live with, and a mom or dad starting to date or thinking about getting remarried. That's another way, using the skits, that the kids can talk about questions and feelings they have about these things without our asking personal questions."

Parents readily accept the format and have been surprisingly quick to grasp the concept of displacement. They appreciate the nonprying posture of the leaders. The leaders can, if it seems useful, give more examples of the themes that will be covered in the group, as well as the ways some sessions have unfolded in previous groups. After 15 minutes or so ask the parents if they have questions about the intervention itself, or whether they have specific concerns about their youngsters that would be important for the leaders to know ahead of time.

Parent questions:

My child hasn't seen his father for three years. Will the talk about visiting upset her? My son hasn't talked about the divorce since it happened four years ago. What happens if he just doesn't say anything in the group? What if my daughter doesn't want to keep coming to the group? Will you be talking about how kids get along with their stepparents?

Leaders' response:

Answer these concerns as directly as you can. Address the possibility that feelings and questions from a long-in-the-past divorce may still concern and trouble a child.

Note the value of a quiet child hearing others put into words what he/she has been thinking. **Remind parents that no youngster will be pressured to continue coming to the group. Mention that we have had only approximately a 3% drop-out rate across three years. Note that children may choose to listen and not talk;** either way, all children seem to find the group experience helpful.

At the end of the meeting some parents and stepparents linger in order to ask questions or share concerns more privately. Thus, at the end of the meeting it is helpful for leaders to say, "Sometimes people have questions or concerns they would like to discuss privately. We will stay here awhile after the meeting in case some of you would like to talk."

Encourage parents to call if they have any questions or concerns. Be sure the parents have the appropriate telephone numbers.

II. The Post-Group Meeting between Parents and Leaders

Materials

coffee, tea, or other beverages

donuts, cookies, or fruit

napkins

paper cups

Rationale/Purposes

After a group ends, parents are usually curious about what sorts of issues emerged in the sessions. They anticipate feedback about how the group went, and sometimes want to share their observations regarding reactions of their children. Further, this meeting is an opportunity for the leaders to help sensitize parents to concerns children have when their parents divorce.

Aims/Goals

1. To communicate to parents the specific questions and feelings which children addressed in the course of the group, but without betraying the promise of protecting the confidentiality of individual youngsters.

2. To provide for parents some suggestions about how they might cope with their children's questions and feelings.

3. To elicit feedback from the parents regarding observations they might have made concerning their children's reactions to the group.

Activities

The session is divided into the leaders' presentation of themes which emerged in the group, suggestions to parents for how certain child behaviors, conflicts or questions might be addressed, and the parents describing their observations of children's reactions to the group. Each of these topics usually results in some considerable discussion.

Group Discussion

In presenting the feelings and questions children were concerned about, preface statements with phrases such as

> "Many of the kids were worried about . . . "
>
> "Nearly all the kids seem to feel . . ."
>
> "Just as we found in our other groups, the children in this group had questions about . . ."

Help parents to see how common and normal these themes are.

Rather than list a large array of the themes at once, it has worked best for us to begin by saying,

> "We've enjoyed working with your children. They came up with a lot of issues and they were able to talk about them in a constructive way. We'd like to share their questions, ideas and feelings with you tonight. If you have any questions or comments as we tell you about the group, please feel free to say what's on your mind. This isn't a formal lecture.
>
> "Let's start with a feeling that is very common for kids to have, namely upset feelings they have when they hear their parents argue or when one parent makes comments which put another parent down. Arguing is, of course, commonplace in divorce. After all, people hardly split up because they get along so well, love being with each other, and see eye-to-eye about nearly everything. So even in so-called civilized divorces there is bound to be some fighting. Also, even after the divorce, it's pretty common for parents to still have some angry or upset feelings, so that it's not at all unusual for kids to hear a parent saying some unpleasant and derogatory things about the other parent.
>
> "Most of the kids in this group, just like kids in other groups we've had, are pretty clear about how much they dislike arguing or hearing one parent make negative remarks about the other parent. It makes them feel sort of helpless because they don't know what to do or say. It also makes a lot of kids both sad and mad at the same time to hear arguing or put-downs. That's not a surprise because kids haven't gotten a divorce from either parent. They still often care about both parents. The problem is that kids don't know what to say or do. They'd like to tell parents that fighting upsets them and that hearing put-downs makes them sad and angry, but they're scared to tell parents that, scared the parent will get mad at them or feel hurt. Now, we're not telling you never to get angry at your ex-spouse or to never make a nasty comment about your ex-spouse. You're not robots. But it is

> helpful to keep that at a minimum, and when it does happen, it's a good idea to tell your kids later that day or the next day that you 'know most kids hate to hear their parents argue and don't like hearing one parent put down the other, but parents are human and divorce gets grown-ups really angry at each other sometimes, but I love you and it's okay for you to love your dad (mom) even if I don't.'"

Note that in sharing with parents this or any other theme, it is important to **normalize parents' actions and feelings** as well as the children's. Parents often are sensitive to the possibility that some of their divorce-related behavior may be hard for their youngsters to handle. And since most parents are decent people who are deeply concerned about their children, they already are concerned about how the children are reacting to the divorce. It is appropriate and helpful for leaders to articulate the realistic strains and conflicts for parents which typically accompany divorce.

Guard against the impulse to perceive the parents as so caught up in the vicissitudes of divorce and its aftermath that they are less than appropriately concerned about the well-being of their youngsters. Because children often are hurt and angry in the wake of divorce, and because this intervention permits children to express their feelings so clearly, leaders can become seduced into seeing themselves as the all-good rescuers of these uncared for, or ill-cared for, victims. It is very much akin to the rescue fantasy beginning therapists must contend with in themselves, but here--because five to eight children are seen at once and because the nature of the intervention facilitates dramatic and compelling expressions of pain and accounts of highly conflicted, stressful family interactions--the urge to rescue children from parents can become quite strong. Such a posture does a disservice to parents and, further, makes it impossible to communicate effectively with parents in the session.

The illustration given also emphasizes the importance of going beyond describing to parents the multitude of ways children can feel upset or worried in the aftermath of divorce. Simply to report these to parents would leave them feeling hurt, helpless, and possibly angry at the leaders. Instead, offer suggestions for how parents might constructively cope with the upset feelings of their children after describing how and why children can feel bad. In the illustration above, reducing the level of parent arguing and of public, angry put-downs (even when the other parent is not there), reassuring the child that the parent still loves him (her), and giving the child permission still to love the other parent are concrete suggestions for coping with observed or anticipated reactions of children to hostilities between parents.

Another example might be telling the parents how children feel about stepparents. It is helpful to emphasize the underlying feelings of competition with the stepparent (or person whom the parent is dating) for the parent's affection and feelings of being disloyal to the parent who is the same sex as the stepparent or dating partner that can be stimulated when the child begins to like the latter. In this way, parents can be helped by _reframing_, as it were, the issue of their child's misbehavior with or antagonism toward the stepparent or dating partner. Again, description is not sufficient. **Give specific suggestions for how to handle these actual or potential child reactions.** Verbalizing the _difference_ between love of one adult for another adult and the love a parent has for his or her child is helpful. The two "love pies" example from the Visiting and Remarriage sessions (Sessions B and C) can be given. Similarly, encourage parents to put into words with the children the fact that "It is all right for children to care about dad and another man, like a stepparent, or coach, or music teacher or a man their mom is dating. Having that feeling isn't being disloyal to dad" can be helpful in alleviating the causes underlying a youngster's inability to form a constructive relationship with a stepparent or parental dating partner.

Other examples of how parents may help their children cope with the upset feelings and questions which constitute some of their reactions to specific issues can be found in the chapters dealing with the group sessions. Essentially, the leaders share with parents the explanations of conflicts and the coping strategies which can be used successfully to ameliorate them as the leaders have already articulated in the group sessions.

Finally, as the meeting is drawing to a close, ask parents if they have noticed any changes in their children since the group started. Deliberately cast an open-ended, neutral question so that parents can feel as free as possible to report negative as well as positive change, if any. Although this question can be asked here, it is far more common for parents to share these observations spontaneously early in the group. Often-heard comments from parents include:

> "He's finally opening up and talking with me about the divorce."
>
> "She never asked any questions about the divorce and now she's asking a lot of good questions."
>
> "She seems nicer with her stepdad, like she isn't so angry anymore."
>
> "He seems a lot less tense now."

Some parents report that their youngsters did not say a word about the group or the divorce but eagerly looked forward to the sessions and now seem happier or more relaxed. This confirms our impression that children need not be active verbally in group sessions to benefit from the intervention. As the time for ending the meeting approaches, **thank parents for their cooperation and say good-bye.**

PART E

EVALUATION

I. Evaluation Design and Results

Introduction

Over the course of the five years during which we conducted groups for later elementary school-age youngsters, informal feedback from parents and teachers was clearly positive. Many parents spontaneously reported several kinds of changes they observed in their children. These included: 1) a marked increase in children being able to ask their parents questions and express feelings about the divorce; 2) a decrease in irritability and provocative behavior at home; and 3) a shift in general affect toward appearing happier and more relaxed. Teachers also spontaneously offered comments about some children seeming to be able to concentrate better on their work and get along better with their peers.

In addition to these anecdotal reports from parents and teachers, research assistants held exit interviews with the children. The great majority of children claimed that the groups helped them feel more comfortable in talking about divorce, that it helped to hear other children talk about divorce, that things seemed easier at home, and that they could talk more readily with parents about divorce (Kalter, Pickar and Lesowitz, 1984). These "consumer satisfaction" data indicated that children's views of their experiences in the groups were decidedly positive.

Group leaders also reported that this intervention appeared useful for the children. The readiness with which group members talked about divorce issues and the vividness of their memories and current feelings about various facets of divorce suggested that these issues were of great and continuing concern for them. Group leaders noted how relieved children appeared to be by discussions of feelings of self-blame, loyalty conflicts, worries about parental arguments, anger, and sadness. The process of *normalization feelings* and *clarification of misperception* were very much in evidence and seemed to be useful to many group members.

Formal Evaluation

Despite the spontaneous, positive comments by parents and teachers, the self-reports of the children, and the observations made by group leaders, it is important to examine in a more formal and rigorous fashion the impact of this intervention on the participants. In order to do this, we conducted a quantitative, experimental analysis of the effects of our intervention. The remainder of this chapter focuses on this evaluation.

Subjects

Subjects were children who entered our program as either fourth or fifth graders. Sixth graders were not included in this evaluation because services could not be offered to students in the control group the following year when they became seventh graders and moved to the junior high school. The children came from the following elementary schools: Field, Gallimore, Lincoln, and Whitmore Lake. The students were nearly all Caucasian and ranged in family socioeconomic status (SES) from lower to upper class with the majority (over 60%) coming from the middle three SES categories, i.e., lower-middle, middle, and upper-middle class (Hollingshead, 1972). A total of 81 children participated in the evaluation, though due to some missing data, the analyses to be reported are based on between 49 and 68 subjects depending on the particular dimension studied.

Measures

We selected empirical measures based on several considerations. All instruments had to meet the following criteria:

- Good psychometric properties; specifically, acceptable reliability and validity.
- Age appropriate to the sample.
- Tapped dimensions relevant to general child adjustment or to divorce-related feelings and concepts.

After a careful review of available child-focused measures, we selected the following instruments:

1. *The Child Behavior Checklist* (Achenbach and Edelbrock, 1983). This widely used and extensively researched instrument consists of 113 child behavior items rated by *parents* on a three-point scale (Never, Somewhat True or Sometimes, and Very True or Always). The aim of The Child Behavior Checklist is to assess the degree of psychopathology across two "broad-band" scales (Internalizing, Externalizing) of problem behavior and several "narrow-band" scales indicating the degree of problems in more specific areas (e.g., Aggression, Depression, Hyperactivity, Social Withdrawal, Delinquency, etc.). We modified this measure by dropping a cluster of items which focused on extremely pathological behaviors (e.g., plays with feces) for children in later elementary school grades so as not to offend parents and thus reduce our response rate. The version we used contained 76 of the 113 original items. The Child Behavior Checklist-Modified (CBCL-M) was the centerpiece of our evaluation efforts.
2. *The Perceived Self-Competency Scales* (Harter, 1982). This instrument is aimed at assessing how children perceive their own competence. It consists of 28 items on a forced-choice format. Four scales are derived from the items: Cognitive, Social,

Physical, and General. While not a direct measure of self-esteem, the PSCS is an approximation of self-esteem.

3. The Locus Control Scale for Children (Nowicki and Strickland, 1973). There are 40 true-false items on the LCS-C. It is intended to measure the degree to which children feel helpless and at the mercy of external events (high "external") versus in charge of their own destinies (high "internal"). Since parental divorce could lead children to take an "external" posture, and since such scores are related to somewhat poor adjustment, this scale was chosen as another type of adjustment indicator.

In addition to these three well-known measures, all of which have been extensively researched in general populations of children and have been shown to have excellent reliability and validity characteristics, we selected two instruments which focus on divorce-specific issues.

1. The Parent Perception Inventory (Hazzard, Christensen, and Margolin, 1983). The PPI consists of 18 items, each measured on a five-point scale ranging from very frequent to never at all. It focuses on parenting behaviors (e.g., helps you with your homework, spanks you). A Positive and Negative score is derived for mother, father, and (if applicable) stepmother and stepfather. Since divorce can lead to a youngster having angry, negative feelings toward parents which can interfere in healthy parent-child relationships, we chose this instrument to see if these perceptions changed.

2. The Divorce Perception Test (Plunkett and Kalter, 1984). The DPT consists of 25 items on a four-point scale which asks children to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each statement. Items focus on children's responses to divorce, e.g.,

was shocked and surprised, happy, sad and felt like crying, etc. The DPT yields three scores: Sadness/Insecure, Abandonment, and Active Coping. Since subjects are asked to rate each item with respect to how children usually feel or think when their parents divorce, it is a measure of undefensive awareness of what are acceptable feelings and thoughts. Therefore, a higher score on each scale indicates better awareness of their internal reactions to divorce which one would assume to be related to less acting out, less depression, and generally better adjustment.

Design

The experimental design consisted of random assignment within School x Sex x Grade strata to the experimental (E) condition (in which children were placed in a prevention group and received immediate service) or to the control (C) condition (in which children were put on a waiting list and received the intervention five to seven months later). Data analyses were cast in a Time (pre-testing before anyone was in a group versus post-testing, which occurred on the average six months later just before children in the C condition entered a prevention group) x Condition (E versus C) x Sex (male versus female) x Grade (fourth versus fifth) factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Procedures

The CBCL-M was mailed to the custodial parent of each child, one to two weeks prior to any prevention group beginning (T_1). It was also mailed approximately six months later (T_2), four to five months after the E condition youngsters had completed their groups and just prior to the C condition children beginning their groups. Parents returned the CBCL-M by mail in a stamped, addressed envelope. At T_1 and T_2 all children were administered the PSCS, LCS-C, PPI and DPT in one-to-one sessions by research assistants at school during school hours. In this way, we had the measures on children in the E and C conditions before anyone had received the intervention (T_1) and again several months after E condition children had participated in the groups, but before the C condition children received the intervention. Changes over the T_1-T_2 time period should indicate the effects of the intervention.

The number of children (N) in the data analyses fluctuated between 49 and 68 as noted earlier. The reason for this is the necessity for having a child's test results at both T_1 and T_2 in order for the comparisons to be made. If a child (or parent for the CBCL-M) did not entirely complete an instrument at both T_1 and T_2 he or she was dropped for the analysis of that particular instrument.

Results

As noted earlier, the CBCL-M was the key measure of changes in child adjustment due to the intervention. The results for the CBCL-M indicate that the intervention was notably helpful to boys. Significant findings ($p < .05$) were obtained by examining Time x Condition interactions as well as higher order interactions involving the Time x Condition component.

For boys (N=31), the E group on the average had fewer problems while the C group remained about the same on the following CBCL-M scales:

1. Externalizing problems ($p < .02$)
2. Aggression ($p < .02$)
3. Delinquency ($p < .09$)
4. Depression ($p = .10$)
5. Schizoid ($p < .06$)
6. Social withdrawal ($p < .09$)
7. Somatic complaints ($p < .10$)

It appears that the intervention had a salutary effect on multiple areas of behavior problems for boys across both grades. These findings are consistent with anecdotal reports of parents and teachers.

For girls (N=37), the CBCL-M findings are puzzling. There were no significant differences between fourth grade E and C condition girls nor were there even any trends in that direction. Fourth grade girls on both conditions showed a moderate decrease in problems from T_1 to T_2.

The findings for fifth grade girls are even more difficult to interpret. Fifth grade girls in the E condition stayed about the same from T_1 to T_2 while their peers in the C condition showed a decrease in the following scales:

1. Aggression ($p < .01$)
2. Cruel ($p < .01$)
3. Externalizing ($p < .06$)
4. Hyperactivity ($p < .05$)

It is important to note that some parents of these fifth grade girls reported an increase in assertiveness. No parent or teacher reported any problems in aggression, cruelty, or hyperactivity for any of these girls.

Results for the remaining measures, all administered directly to children in one-to-one sessions favor the E over the C condition. However, these findings were not as dramatic as the CBCL-M (filled out by the custodial parent) results showing the significant and positive impact of the intervention on boys. In each of the following findings, the E condition children moved in a healthy or positive direction from T_1 to T_2, while the C condition children who had not yet participated in a prevention group stayed about the same.

1. General Perceived Self-Competence scale on the PSCS for fourth grade boys and girls ($p < .10$).
2. Awareness of Sad/Insecure feelings on the DPT for boys and girls in both grades ($p < .02$).
3. Increased positive perception of mother on the PPI for boys and girls in both grades ($p = .10$).
4. Decreased negative perception of father for boys and girls in both grades ($p = .10$).

It is important to note that for all findings reported there were no SES, school, or group leader differences. This seems to indicate that the effects of the intervention are not dependent upon working in a particular school with a certain SES population, and with particular group leaders.

Discussion

The results of the formal, quantitative evaluation of the intervention program indicate a clear-cut positive effect on boys in fourth and fifth grade across all levels of SES, in several different schools, and irrespective of which leaders conducted the groups. Several problem behaviors were reduced and some troublesome divorce-specific feelings and perceptions were modified in a positive direction. Further, these findings were consistent with spontaneous, anecdotal reports of parents and teachers.

The results pertaining to girls were mixed and puzzling. The CBCL-M showed no effect on the intervention in fourth grade girls and an apparent negative impact on fifth grade girls. However, the latter is not consistent with anecdotal parent and teacher reports which emphasized the increased assertiveness and capacity to experience appropriate resentful feelings for some of these girls. The CBCL-M findings for girls are also inconsistent with findings from the other empirical measures which showed a positive effect on fourth grade girls (and boys) on General Perceived Self-Competence and a possible effect on fourth and fifth grade girls (as well as boys) in awareness of appropriate sad/insecure feelings, increased positive feelings toward mother, and decreased negative feelings toward father.

The effects of divorce on girls has been a controversial area within the divorce literature. Recent evidence (e.g., Kalter, Riemer, Brickman, and Chen, 1985; Wallerstein, 1985) indicates that while girls appear to be less affected by parental divorce than boys are, problems begin to emerge when girls move into early adolescence and adult years. It is possible that the "negative findings" on the CBCL-M for our fifth grade girls may reflect an appropriate increase in assertiveness and perhaps an awareness of resentful feelings about the divorce which will stand them in good stead as they move into the more turbulent adolescent years. This hypothesis awaits an empirical test.

Overall, our findings indicate that there is good reason to implement this model for later elementary school children whose parents have divorced. The advantages to boys are clear. There are fewer but some demonstrable advantages to girls. The possibility that fifth grade girls have some difficulty following the intervention requires further research of a longitudinal and more in-depth nature.

II. Minimal Feedback Evaluation

In service projects, it is helpful to have a minimal feedback evaluation measure. It is recommended that the Parent Perception Inventory (Hazzard, Christensen & Margdin, 1983) be used. In addition, the exit interview may be useful.

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Appendix A

Letter to Parents Describing the Groups

Dear Parent:

The Family Styles Program at the University of Michigan will be conducting a limited number of discussion groups for children living in single-parent or remarried households. Research has shown that important changes in family life are events which children need to learn to cope with in order to do as well as possible in school and socially. Even if a child has adjusted well to past family changes, he or she may still have questions or concerns about past or ongoing events.

The aims of the discussion groups are to 1) give children a chance to bring up any questions or concerns they may have, 2) let children know that growing up in a single-parent or remarried household is not unusual, 3) help children cope with any special feelings or worries they may have, and 4) correct some upsetting ideas children often have about divorce and remarriage. The groups are conducted at the school during school hours. Each meeting lasts 50 minutes and the group meets for 8 weeks. Groups have a female and male co-leader trained in this program.

To find out how helpful the groups are, each child is given several questionnaires before the group begins, just after it ends and twice again the following year. We also ask that the parent(s) fill out a brief questionnaire about their child before and after the group meetings.

At the end of the group and again a year later a report will be available to parents about the groups. No child's name will be used in these reports and all information will be confidential. To find out if the groups also help children do better in school we will examine the school records of the children.

Since there are a limited number of openings in the groups, we hope you will reserve a place for your child by signing the consent form. If your child does not want to participate after you sign, he or she does not have to. Signing only reserves a place if the child wants it. If you do not want your child to be in a group, please sign the second line of the consent form and return it so that we can give that spot to another child. If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Neil Kalter at the University of Michigan (764-3167).

Sincerely,

Dr. Neil Kalter

Appendix B

Parental Consent Form

I understand that the Family Styles Program will be conducting a limited number of discussion groups for children from single-parent or remarried families. The groups will meet in school, during school hours, and will be led by one male and one female co-leader. Each group will last 8 weeks and will meet for 50 minutes each week. As part of this service, I understand that my child will fill out several brief questionnaires before and after the groups and twice again the following year. School records will also be reviewed. Parents will be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire before and after the groups. All information will be confidential. I understand that giving my consent means that my child will have the option of participating or not. No child will be pressured. Any child may drop out of the group at any time.

I give my consent for my child's participation, ______________________________

I do not give my consent, ______________________________

Please Print:

Your name ______________________________

Your child's name ______________________________

Your child's school ______________________________

Your child's grade ______________________________

Appendix C

Examples of Group Newspapers

SPECIAL EDITION

DIVORCE ADVICE

MANAGING EDITORS: Dr. Kalter and Ms. Garvin

STAFF REPORTERS:
Jesse
Jill
Joey
Kendall
Mark
Michele
Sarah

FEELINGS ABOUT DIVORCE

Our roving reporters asked kids how they felt about divorce. All of the kids told us that divorce is real hard. Some kids felt angry, other kids felt sad. Several kids said they couldn't explain exactly how they felt: they just felt mixed-up.

We want to share with you some of the good things and some of the bad things kids told us about divorce.

BAD THINGS ABOUT DIVORCE

Divorce changes the family. Kids sometimes feel helpless, because noone asks them if they want the divorce. Most of the time noone asks the kids if they want to move or change schools either. It just happens. Several kids said they wished their parents would tell them what was going on.

After the divorce kids live with only one parent. Lots of kids miss the parent they don't live with, even if they love the parent they do live with. Several kids told us they really miss their dads. They wish their dad would visit more. When their dad didn't visit, or didn't write the letter he promised, kids feel bad. Kids may wonder if they were bad or did something wrong.

Most kids told us these bad things wouldn't feel so bad if they knew the divorce wasn't their fault. Kids agreed that it helped a lot when mom and dad told the kids they still loved them.

GOOD THINGS ABOUT DIVORCE

Even though divorce is hard, and may take a long time to get used to, our reporters found out there were some good things about divorce, too.

Most kids agreed that after the divorce there was less fighting and less drinking. One boy said his mom takes better care of him now. Another kid said he liked not seeing his dad because his dad could be mean. Several kids said they liked visiting their dad because he took them places and gave them presents.

CHOOSING SIDES

After a divorce a lot of kids feel that they can only be loyal to one parent. Some of the kids we talked to felt closer to their moms, other kids felt closer to their dads. Lots of kids said they still loved both their parents.

Most of the kids said they wished they didn't have to choose sides. One boy said he "felt caught in the middle of a tug-of-war." A girl agreed, saying she didn't like it when her mom said bad things about her dad. Another kid said he got mad when his dad tried to buy his love with presents and promises.

BOYFRIENDS, GIRLFRIENDS, AND STEPPARENTS

Most kids said it was hard when their mom had a boyfriend or their dad had a girlfriend.

One girl said she didn't like it when her mom's boyfriend told her what to do. She didn't think her mom's boyfriend should try to act like her real dad.

Another girl agreed, saying it was hard to like her mom's boyfriend, because she was afraid her real dad would get mad. Several kids said they wished their parents would understand that kids could like both their dad and the mom's boyfriend, but in different ways.

One boy told us he felt uncomfortable when his dad and his girlfriend kissed or held hands. He wishes they would do that in private.

Several kids told us they didn't like it when the boyfriend or girlfriend had kids of their own. They said they were afraid that the new kids would get all of the love and attention.

Some of the kids we interviewed liked their mom's boyfriend or dad's girlfriend and some of the kids didn't. All of the kids agreed that they needed time to get to know the new boyfriend or girlfriend.

DEAR MOM AND DAD

The kids we talked to had some special messages for their parents.

Lots of kids told us they hoped their parents didn't blame them for the divorce. Several kids told us they remember being very surprised and sad when they first heard about the divorce.

Kids who live with their moms told us that they miss their dads. Several kids would like to visit more with their dad.

Most kids wanted their parents to know that kids need time to get to know their parent's new girlfriend or boyfriend. Several kids told us they like their mom's boyfriend or dad's girlfriend; they just don't want to choose between the girlfriend and their real mom or the boyfriend and their real dad.

Most of all, all the kids want their parents to keep on loving them. Kids are sometimes afraid that their mom or dad will divorce them, too.

ADVICE COLUMN

Dear Abby,

Whenever I visit my dad his girlfriend is there, too. All they do is sit on the couch and kiss and hug. It makes me sick. What should I do?

Signed,
Disgusted

Dear Disgusted,

Lots of kids get mad or feel uncomfortable when their mom or dad starts dating. It's hard to share a parent with someone new. Maybe you can ask your dad if the two of you can spend some special time alone during your next visit.

Dear Abby,

Sometimes my mom makes me so mad! Whenever I try to tell her something important, she either starts yelling or begins to cry. How can I get her to listen?

Signed,
Can't Talk to Mom

Dear Can't Talk to Mom,

After a divorce parents and kids sometimes get upset very easily, and that can make it hard to talk. If you can't talk to your mom directly, try writing her a note or drawing her a picture. Then leave the note or picture some place where your mom will find it.

Dear Abby,

My parents got divorced last year and I'm still unhappy. Am I normal? Will the pain ever go away?

Signed,
Still Sad

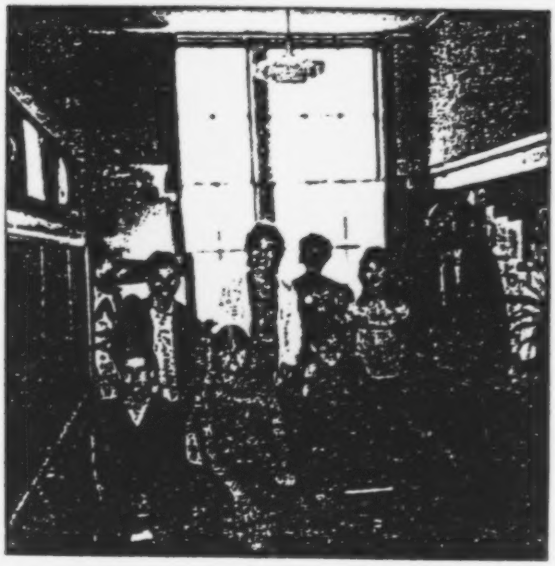
Dear Still Sad,

Of course you're normal! Lots of kids have parents who get divorced and these kids feel sad and angry and confused just like you. Try not to worry so much. It will take some time, but you will feel better.

Many thanks to all of our terrific reporters at Tanger School.

SPECIAL EDITION

The Divorce Post



MANAGING EDITORS: Ms. Alpern and Mr. Rubin

STAFF REPORTERS:
Charity
Dawn
Dena
Doug
Greg
Paul
Tawan
Vernon

REASONS FOR DIVORCE

Our roving reporters spent the day interviewing kids about divorce. One of their questions was: "Why do parents get divorced?". Most kids felt it was because the parents start having fights and can't get along with each other anymore. Other kids noted that parents get tired of each other, don't like each other, or don't love each other anymore. They decide that they just can't live together. Some kids wondered why parents got married in the first place if they didn't love each other. They decided that parents probably did love each other at first, but things changed over time.

Sometimes kids feel that parents get divorced because of something the kids did and they feel the divorce is their fault. However, most agreed that divorce is something that happens between husbands and wives for adult reasons, and not because of the kids.

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THINGS KIDS WORRY ABOUT

Kids talked about some of their worries when their parents get divorced. One kid said he worried that his parents might take their anger out on him and "rough him up" a bit, and also worried that they would take each other's money. Another kid said that when he was younger he wondered if his parents would ever take care of him again. Most kids agreed that kids worry about being abandoned by their parents. Other kids worried about who they were going to live with. They also worried about whether their parents were going to get married again and if so, would they get along with their stepbrothers and stepsisters and stepparents. Another person said he worried about his mom because she seemed to feel really bad after the divorce.

KIDS WORRIES, continued...

Several kids said they have very private feelings about their parents' divorce, and that worries are hard to talk about.

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KIDS' REACTIONS TO PARENTS' FIGHTS

Most kids get scared when they see and hear their parents fighting. They wish it would stop. Sometimes when the parents are fighting they involve the kids. At times they are so upset that they yell at the kids for no good reason and then the kids feel mad.

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GOOD THINGS ABOUT DIVORCE

In general, kids feel like divorce is a bad thing, especially when it first happens. But our interviewer did find out that there are some good things about divorce. The main thing is you don't have to hear so much fighting anymore. Most everyone agreed that it was good when the yelling and screaming stopped. One child said it was good not to hear your name mentioned in so many fights. Another good thing is getting presents from and getting taken out to dinner by your Dad if you don't live with him. One kid said that a good thing about divorce is that you get to meet new people. Finally, one person felt that there wasn't anything good about divorce except that the parents are happier.

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BAD THINGS ABOUT DIVORCE

There are alot of bad things about divorce. Most everyone agreed that you don't know who you're going to live with and it makes kids worried. A big questi is whether or not you'll have to move. Once you find out who you're going to live with, you start missing the parent

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BAD THINGS, continued...

you don't live with. One person said a bad thing about divorce is that you have to go back and forth between your parents. It's hard to have two homes. Finally, one of the worst things about divorce is that it feels like you're not a family anymore, at least not like you used to be.

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ADVICE COLUMN

Dear Abby,

I don't know what to do. I go to visit my Dad and his girlfriend comes over and they're always smooching. I don't like it.

Signed,
Kissy, Kissy

Dear Kissy, Kissy,

It's hard for kids when parents start dating. When you visit your Dad it seems like you don't like to have to share his attention. Ask your Dad if you can spend part of your visit alone with him for some special time together. And then try talking to him about how it makes you feel funny when you see him kissing his girlfriend.

Dear Abby,

I don't know what to do. My parents have just gotten a divorce and I'm living with my grandmother. She does nothing. Help!

Signed,
Hate Living With Grandma

Dear Living With Grandma,

It sounds like you feel you got dumped at Grandma's. Many kids feel very upset after their parents divorce and miss their parents alot. Maybe after things settle down you can start living with one of your parents again. The decisions about who kids are going to live with are hard for parents to make. Try to be patient.

Dear Abby,

My parents got divorced a couple of years ago and I stayed with my mom and she got married again and I don't know what to do 'cause my stepdad makes me go to bed early.

Signed,
Not Sleepy

Dear Not Sleepy,

It's hard to get used to stepparents, especially if they boss you around. Sometimes kids feel like they can't talk to their moms about changes in rules because the moms take the stepdad's side. Try to talk to them together if you feel your bedtime is unfair. They'll listen.

THANKS TO ALL OUR TERRIFIC STAFF REPORTERS AT LINCOLN SCHOOL ! . . .

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Department of Mental Health
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